

Homecoming

by fyre

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1. Homecoming Chapter 1

HOMECOMING

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TEASER: The first Trilogy's story from a slightly skewed view. What if Amidala had refused to separate her children? (and the chaos that ensues!)

TIME LINE/CATEGORY: Archive: Between the Trilogies Alternate Universe. Set from post Episode III (I assume) through Episode VI The Return of the Jedi.

RATING: PGish Violence, some language, mentions of abuse.

DISCLAIMER: No major plot-lines, characters, setting, or major events alluded to in this story are mine in any way. Some of the dialogue is pulled straight from the movies or from Lucas authorized novelizations for the sake of continuity and is thus logically NOT mine. No money is being made off this story. Please ask author before reproducing or posing anywhere else.

SPECIAL THANKS TO: My sisters who late late one night when we were hardly lucid had this miraculous and ingenious (or stupid and weird depending on your personal opinion! grin) grain of idea which I enjoyably turned into a story neither of them will want to read anyway! :)

And to Kaly who's indispensable feedback and grammar help has been invaluable! ;P

NOTES: Words that are ** are thoughts or there for emphasis, () are for flashbacks whether whole scenes or just words half remembered, // indicates thought projections or telepathy. And I apologize in advance for the grammar and spelling mistakes that got by me!

WARNING: I've made some significant changes to the first parts of this story so you may have to reread before you get to the new stuff.

PROLOGUE~

(The boy . . .)

(What about the boy?)

(. . . His mother . . . the risk . . .)

(What about the girl? His sister . . .)

"Luke" she whispered, eyes dark like their mother's, just as sad. She was curled under their mother's covers in her strangely empty bed, heavy with the faint spicy perfume that had clung to her hair as well as the sheets. Her hand reached out to draw him under the makeshift tent she had made with the blankets, to hide from the voices echoing out in the corridor.

(. . . the father . . . Emperor's horror . . .)

In the darkness she held onto him, her own dark hair atangle, so different from his own sandy hair and blue eyes; like his father, his mother used to whisper to him as if it were some deadly unspoken secret. His sister's hair caught in his fingers, knotted.

(. . . Jedi . . .what about--)

Their mother used to braid her hair but she wasn't there to do it today, or tomorrow, or the day after . . .

(What about the boy?)

He hid deeper under the covers, somehow frightened, clutching tight to his sister, the only one he had left. His mother had told him to look out for her. No matter what he'd never let her go.

THE BEGINNING~

The space port was like half a dozen others the boy had had the unfortunate pleasure of visiting over the last five years. Through some careful sneaking, ingenuity, and a little luck he'd survived.

Just.

It also helped to have light fingers. That boy on Corellia had told

him he was the best he'd seen in a while which he took some small pride in. No one noticed the urchin with filthy overlarge clothes that strung his way nimbly through the crowd, carefully brushing close to aliens and offworlders alike trying not to draw notice to his light quick movements. And that was just the way he liked it.

Imperial credits, loose change, an occasional bauble or Old Republic piece-- he tucked them all away into his sleeve, his shirt, his belt, his shoes . . .

Even when a Bothan turned his sharp, suspicious attention towards his suspect movements, he simply held very very still and whispered under his breath a mantra of safety.

*"_I'm not here, I'm not here, you can't see me, I'm not here . . .
_"*

It seemed to work and he would skitter back to his temporary resting place (never *_Home_*, never). Ships were leaving every hour; he'd pick one at random, hop on board and hope for the best. Port authorities were becoming too curious and he'd rather deal with spacers than them any day. He'd leave this system without knowing its name heading for some distant outpost not knowing its name either. It had been that way before, it would be that way again. The stars needed no names for him like they did the spacers. Sullust, Calamari, Coruscant it was all the same only greener, busier, wetter, darker. Space still held its appeal, the empty far reaches interrupted by systems in which ordinary people made their homes. Maybe this time he'd go someplace warm. He shivered. It had been a long time since he'd been warm.

He hadn't planned on being caught.

In truth he hadn't planned on stealing from the cloaked man in the first place. He looked poor, unobtrusive, forgettable, blending in and disappearing into the woodwork as it were. Like himself. But the stranger had caught his eye earlier that rotation when he had first exited his transport and he had trailed him through the crowd to his lodgings, a temporary thing to be sure. There was something about him, something that made him take the risk, something that drew him inexorably closer. He shook his head. Such thoughts were dangerous. But he couldn't help it, he *_had_* to see the man, if only to catch a glimpse of his eyes. And perhaps pick his pocket he rationalized to himself hastily, trying to explain the strange nagging need away as the man reappeared amid the streams of arriving and leaving people and droids. He'd be quick, he thought to himself, lighting fast as always. He'd fulfill this unnerving draw, flitch a few credits and be off. The man would never know what--

The hand descended faster than his startled blue eyes could follow and locked around his skinny wrist trapping him effectively.

The cowed man whirled around, odd bright eyes capturing him just as much as the hand did, searching him with curious puzzlement instead of snapping in anger and raising alarm. Swallowing hard, straining against the grip, his thoughts spun frantically as he whispered.

"I'm not here, I'm not here, let go of me, I'm not here. . ."

The man's expression shifted to one of astonishment for an instant and then instead of letting him go, he altered his hold to grasp his hand and simply drew him closer.

What by the Force was the boy doing *_here_?*

It was him, Obi-Wan was sure of it. He hadn't been hiding for so long that he had forgotten who and what he was, what his purpose to keep living was. If the Force directed at him wasn't evidence enough, the thief's appearance was. He looked so much like his father, it was uncanny. He had left the children with Amid-- Padme. She'd insisted and he hadn't the heart to tear her son away from her, not then, not so soon after Anakin had-- died.

Yes, he'd expected the children to one day seek him out, it was inevitable, it was destined. Children, the boy especially, that strong in the Force were always drawn to those who could nurture the gift inside them. It had been that way for thousands of generations and wasn't about to stop now just because of unfavorable galactic politics. It hadn't stopped

Anakin and he'd been a slave.

But Obi-Wan pushed that thought away, it still ached inside when he thought about his dearest friend, his lost apprentice. No time for that now, no time to dwell on the past. The future had come upon him in his distraction and tried to pick his pocket.

The boy should be on Alderaan with his sister not here so close to the Core systems, so close to Coruscant! What could have happened for him to end up here, like-like this?

He'd felt Padme die, he remembered that day with clarity. Gathering moisture, just enough to live on from his vaporator, he had turned to head back inside the Spartan hovel he now called home for lack of a better word only to be struck by the sudden fleeting disturbance in the Force. He had reached out for it and tasted the shedding of sorrow, the leaving of life and all its tragic circumstance.

He'd felt the relief of death.

There is no death, he reminded himself firmly refusing to acknowledge grief, *_there is the Force_.*

The children were safe however, he had reassured himself though his numbed shock. He could reach out and feel them beneath the shield he and Master Yoda had woven around them after Padme had refused to give up her son. They bound so tightly together it was hard to see where one ended and the other began. He had felt no danger, no threat to them.

But here was the boy, several seasons older in the middle of one of the seedier ports at the edge of the galactic core. *_Was his sister _ . . .?_* No, the Jedi Knight quickly concluded as he stepped out of the main flow of now irate pedestrian traffic pulling the resisting

boy with him. No, he was alone, the familiar bond with his sister torn, disconnected, as if someone had ripped the two painfully apart. His sister was safe on Alderaan while they--

"Clear the way!"

The Knight looked up quickly feeling his reluctant charge stiffen almost as immediately as he had *_before_* the projected voice had filled the port. Stormtroopers in their neat ordered rows came marching down the main faraway: travelers, droids, and locals scattering frantically out of their way knowing full well by now how Imperial troops handled the local populations. After the first squad had passed, the reason behind this show of Imperial might reared its dark head.

Vader. Kenobi thought grimly moving slightly to shield and hide the now terrified child behind him. *_Would the day's surprises never end?*

It was the first time he'd seen the abomination that his apprentice had become since their duel years ago and if Kenobi was shocked by his appearance as the rest of the crowd was he didn't show it. The Dark Lord passed, cloak swirling behind him, intent on something else, some other poor unfortunate victim who Obi-Wan felt a brief pang of sympathy for before the whole crowd it seemed let out a collective sigh of relief. Looking down at his captured pickpocket he found the boy clinging to his hand with a death grip, no longer fighting the hold, wide blue eyes peering out from behind his cloak following the retreating Imperial party.

He placed his free hand lightly on the boy's shivering shoulder. "Let's go, Luke." Before the child could protest, the man simply steered him away from the port traffic and the departing armored spectacle.

He'd been right. The lodgings the cloaked man had secured had been temporary and small. His bags weren't even unpacked. But then Luke hadn't exactly ever planned on knowing this first hand. He'd heard of all sorts of odd sick people both human and alien, had the unfortunate, mind-choking, unthinkable experience of meeting some of them when caught by various forms of Authority and on several of the cargo ships he'd hoped onto. And he remembered too well his guardians on Alderaan, and he'd rather be back *_Home_* with *_Them_* than here. At least there he knew what to expect.

He heard the door close behind him and lock and unspeakable panic descended. He yanked himself away from the stranger and stumbled back trying to keep as much distance between himself and the man until he could get out of here. His breath caught in his throat as if someone was squeezing it tight as his mind went down dark places that he had adamantly refused to think about, refused to touch, that festered out of sight, well out of light of day.

The stranger stared at him in honest confusion for a long moment before sick, twisted clarity dawned in his clear eyes and he unconsciously took a step towards the near panicked boy.

He backed up even further, nearly tripping over the rumpled rug,

breathing coming in strangled, tortured gasps, his thin body shaking violently.

/** Not again, not again!** //

Obi-Wan gaped in shock. He had heard that! The boy was broadcasting, loudly, the meaning disgustingly clear. Immediately realizing his mistake and the possible danger, Obi-Wan put even more distance between them trying to quell his anger and outrage over the abuse the child had obviously suffered at the hands of others. That fury would not help the terrified boy, he scolded himself harshly as he let it go. Reaching out through the Force-- part of him caring not a whit if Vader felt him, part of him shielding both of them as tightly as he could --he touched Luke's Force sense lightly, calming, securing, and somehow connecting and laying claim to the fluttering, frantic light that struggled like an injured bird in his grasp.

"Easy Luke," he murmured as he slowly held up his hands. "No one's going to hurt you."

He put a gentle inflection in his voice, intent on quelling the boy's mind numbing fear as he moved with deliberate cautiousness to sit down on the lone seat in the room. He wished he could do more, sooth Luke's hysteric thoughts and heal the unspeakable wounds that bled, that had once been his deep connection with his sister, that had once meant safety, stability, and love. But with Vader close he dared not. Sighing in barely contained frustration as the child's shaking eased into trembling and began breathing again he gave voice to his confusion.

"What are you *_doing_* here?"

Luke blinked at the question; it wasn't what he'd expected. "Who are you?" he asked before he could stop himself, in a voice made loud by fear refused to be acknowledged. He'd be brave, he told himself firmly and he'd live. He'd lived through it before, he could do it again. But inside he was terrified, wanting to just run and run and run . . . At least he wasn't backing away any longer he thought with a little pride, though he was practically up against the far wall anyway. "Why-? H-How do you know my name?"

Ask the easy questions, hmm? Obi-Wan mused as he searched for some reply to offer the boy. *_But then_* he sighed *_none of the questions will be easy when it concerns this child_. *

"It's a long story," he finally said sounding tired, almost weary unto death to Luke's surprise. The stranger looked up at him again, shaking away the gloom that had clouded him a moment before, eyes flashing now.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi and it's a pleasure to meet you Luke, even" he nodded as he stood, tone becoming wry as a faint smile touched his lips "under such unexpected circumstances."

The boy had stiffened as he got to his feet but otherwise had not moved, blue eyes watching him intensely waiting, no doubt, for what he perceived as inevitable and inescapable.

"You look hungry," he announced after a long silence when it became obvious Luke wasn't going to speak. He turned towards the tiny alcove

behind a counter which held the kitchenette.

Luke took a step forward but then stopped himself firmly, more than a little confused because things weren't making any sense. *_Food? Now? Maybe. . . just maybe _.*

"Aren't you going to turn me over to Port Authority?"

The stranger, Obi-Wan, laughed, not looking up from his search through various drawers and cupboards. "No, Luke, I'm not."

"Why not?" Luke asked in flustered annoyance.

"Are you in such a hurry to be sent to a detention center?" he asked with a raised brow and a suppressed chuckle as he set out two plates.

The boy scowled darkly at him, crossing his arms tight. "No."

"Well then this works to both our advantages. Here." The cloaked knight slid the plate and a cup to the edge of the counter at Luke and then pulled away.

Luke made no move towards it. "What do I gotta do?"

Obi-Wan nearly choked. Coughing he turned to stare at the stiff-backed child, whose chin was raised in defiance, watching him. The images that question had sparked in Kenobi were too nauseating to imagine. He shook his head quickly, denying the thought, denying the anger before he spoke.

"Nothing," he said putting as much assurance into the word as he could, using the Force to make the boy *_believe_* when Luke's every instinct rightfully screamed mistrust and danger. "Nothing. You never have to do *_anything_* Luke. And I will never want you to," he finished unable to keep bitter fury from turning those last words into a promise of death for the nameless demons responsible. "Eat," he motioned with a gentle smile as he sat himself down on the now clear counter and resumed his own meal. "Not the best I'm afraid but . . ."

The boy snatched the plate off the counter and hopped back a few steps before warily perching on the edge of the chair after coming to the tentative conclusion that the stranger was not going to leap over the counter and grab him. He then proceeded to gulp down the contents of the cup in one breath and attack the food with the frantic urgency of one who'd gone too long without.

The boy was starving and thirsty and looked as if he hadn't been acquainted with washing water in weeks, a sonic 'fresher and drinking water in several days. His clothing was at least two sizes too big and was covered with grease and his hair was disheveled and what appeared to be dark blond from spending too much time in space ports and not enough time outside in the sunshine. He'd been away from Alderaan and on his own for more than a year at least, most likely longer the Jedi concluded.

"How did you get here?" Obi-Wan asked softly.

"Transport," the boy mumbled his terse reply around the lip of his

cup.

"I take it you didn't pay." Kenobi replied with a dry smile noting that the boy still had the decency to duck his head and blush when someone mentioned his rather unlawful behavior. He was silent for a moment coming quickly to a decision that he ruefully admitted he'd come to the moment he'd found the boy and realized who he was. "We'd best get moving if we want to avoid any trouble," he announced as he got off the counter.

Luke looked up from his now barren plate a little stunned. "We?" he repeated in astonishment, fear beginning to creep back into his voice.

"We," he affirmed causally as he grabbed his two small bags off the bed. The less specific he was the less the little thief would focus on events and his well-grounded fears and simply let his feelings and instinct guide him. At this point it was easier than taking a lengthy amount of time to explain the realities of Luke's situation to him, not with Vader and half an Imperial garrison so close. His blatant use of the Force to calm the boy did not help matters at all. So the Jedi acted as if the whole bizarre unexpected situation was normal, kept his physical distance to assure the little thief he wasn't going to jump him, knowing that young Luke would not fight the Force-tide of events that had drawn him to one of the few remaining Jedi in the first place.

He took the plate from the boy's unresisting grasp and handed him the smaller of the two bags to carry. Luke looked down at the item in bewilderment, trying to figure out how he'd gone from a caught pickpocket to traveling companion so very quickly. "Aren't you worried 'bout your stuff?"

Obi-Wan looked up and found himself smiling at the boy's suspicious tone. "Not really" he laughed again. "Come."

The walkways of the port were crowded with rushing anxious people. Imperials were on the move and that made everyone nervous. Luke looked about the familiar port and then up at the man who walked beside him. He could leave, he thought to himself suddenly, throw the bag at the man and while he was off-balance slip away never to be seen again. He'd never have to risk the adult suddenly changing his mind about their "relationship" with one another. But even as he formulated this tentative plan something inside him twisted painfully in denial of action and though he swore he'd never ever *_ever_* admit it to the cloaked man, running from his side was akin to tearing off his arm and leaving it behind.

In disgust at his own lack of survival instincts he cursed himself mentally, in several languages before turning his attention back to Kenobi.

The man, Obi-Wan, seemed just as capable of blending into a crowd as he was. They doubled back several times which Luke grudgingly approved of before coming to the berths where the ships hung from their airlocks outside the port. The place was crawling with white armored troopers, their feet clacking in perfect time across the metal floor.

Luke had to hurry to keep up with the man's longer stride and was so intent in the effort he nearly didn't catch himself in time when Obi-Wan stopped suddenly just before the airlock corridors. Luke looked up at the man who seemed to be concentrating on something, brow furrowed with effort. Whatever it was, the little thief knew it was important and held very still.

The rhythmic footsteps of troopers approached and Luke shrank inside wondering why he feared discovery, and why the stranger did too. They couldn't be after him, not dozens of masked soldiers, he reminded himself fiercely pushing his terror aside. But they were coming closer. The Stormtroopers were going to find them, he realized with panic. They only had to round the corner to see them--

"Halt!" A muffled voice called just out of sight and the ominous approach of feet stopped.

"Double back!" the commander ordered and with precision Luke listened wide eyed in wonder as the armored men retreated back the way they came.

Luke let out a sigh of relief, looking up at the man who had caught him. The cloaked man looked just about as wrung out by their near miss as he was. He wasn't sure what exactly Obi-Wan had done to be wary around Imperial troops, but he bet it was something that could get him in a lot of trouble if he stayed with the adult. He was tempted to move, to bolt and duck into one of the many vents around the port and vanish into the darkness, but instead he simply stood still, waiting.

Obi-Wan turned and sank down to the child's level and made the mistake of touching the boy's shoulder as he opened his mouth to speak.

The little thief started so violently out of the Jedi's grasp that he dropped the bag and fell

back hard, eyes terrified as he scrambled to put distance between them, all thought of the troops forgotten in face of a more immediate perceived threat.

Obi-Wan blinked in shock at the severe and sudden reaction, cursing himself for being so thoughtless. He tucked his hands into his sleeves, safely out of sight as he spoke softly to the child before he bolted.

"Shh. It's all right, it's all right Luke," he murmured, the Force coloring his low soothing tone in an attempt to ease the palpitant tension. "I'm sorry. I won't touch you again. It's all right now. Come now." He motioned slightly for the boy to stand up, resisting the urge reach out physically to him, to calm and protect him from all the demons that seemed to reside in the darkness of his eyes. Hearing more troop movement, Obi-Wan quickly changed tacts.

"Luke I need your help. Can you get to any of the airlocks unseen?"

Slowly he nodded, eyes filled with confusion as he got to his feet. "Yes, but I don't

under - "

"Later I'll explain everything." Obi-Wan assured him. "Whatever you do, do not let any Imperial see you. Docking ring 42. Now go."

Luke took a hesitant step back and blinked in surprise before bolting for the access vent further down the corridor. Prying it off he looked back quickly at the stranger who was watching his every move. Biting his lip, unnerved by his searching glance he squeezed into the vent, satchel in hand, pulling the grated cover closed behind him.

He crawled through the darkness ducking his head and slithering along when it became narrower brushing away various creepy crawlers that skittered about between his hands and over the bag. It was dark and Luke tried to be as quiet as he could, breathing through his nose, trying not to choke or sneeze with all the dust in the air. He'd done this before, it was nothing new, but Luke had never had anyone *_ask_* him to do it. He wasn't even obligated to listen to Kenobi! But there was an urgency to the situation that left a bitter tang on his tongue and he found himself moving along as quickly as he could towards the airlocks.

Peering out of a floor grate he scoured the corridor with his eyes and ears before pushing the grate up with a loud squeak that made him wince and freeze for an instant. Coming quickly to his senses he climbed up, pulled the bag behind him, replaced the covering, and cautiously made his way to through the access corridor that led to the row of airlocks that stretched out in both directions.

Left or right? he wondered anxiously, rubbing his hands against his trousers. He peered at the sign on the wall in front of him, searching vainly for some clue. But the various symbols under the arrows made no sense. He didn't have time to search both ways! And even if he did, how would he know when he got there? *_Docking ring 42 he said. How'm I suppose to know which one is that_?!* he thought angrily hands twisting the fabric of the satchel painfully.

"Take a squad and search the airlocks." A harsh voice startled Luke out of his thoughts. There was a click of a voder mike from within the troopers helmet before the answer floated back his way.

"Yes sir."

Eyes now wide with panic, Luke turned completely around looking every way at once in frantic frustration. The footsteps grew inexorably closer.

_I'm dead! I'm dead! I'm dead! I'm dead . . _ _ _

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// **Left.** //
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Luke flinched as if someone had struck him and looked around quickly trying to place the voice.

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// **Left Luke. Go left! **//
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It was Obi-Wan's voice, he realized with a start. But where was he?

"Check each airlock personally. Lord Vader doesn't want anything overlooked."

// **Luke, hurry. **// the voice pleaded.

That was it. That was all the deep thinking, bizarre situations, and worrying Luke could take at the moment. It was too much to even consider right now. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath he bolted, sprinting down the left corridor blocking out the troops, the screaming distrustful part of him, and the disembodied voice in his mind. He blocked out everything and let his body lead him where it willed.

He pulled up short next to an airlock, undistinguished and identical to its neighboring airlocks except the symbols labeling it were slightly different. Pounding on the access panel he hid inside, crouching low by the sealed door of the spaceship as the door rumbled closed again, sealing him in darkness.

Hugging his knees to his chest, bag at his feet he buried his head in his arms peaking out from beneath his bangs watching and waiting.

Agonizing minutes passed but Luke flatly refused to acknowledge the persistent doubts that ran hysterical circles in his mind; that this was the wrong airlock, that the troopers were sure to find him and kill him with their search, that this stranger would never come, that he'd be trapped in here until he was sucked of into the blackness of space, that the stranger would come and do terrible, horrible, unspeakable things to him, sell him into slavery, keep him chained like an animal, torture him until death seemed pleasant--

There was a hydraulic hiss and the airlock hatch opened slowly. Luke got to his feet, picking up the travel bag, resigned to face whatever dire fate life had decided to serve to him this week, standing and without tears.

But there was no squad of white armored soldiers with guns ready to blast him into tiny pieces, only a cloaked man who ducked inside and pushed back his hood, looking almost relieved under all that calm to see Luke there.

The man, Obi-Wan, shot him a quick smile as he keyed his access to the ship and entered.

Luke stood very still for a long moment, mind trying to grasp just exactly what was going on but failing miserably.

"Are you coming?"

The boy's head snapped up to face Kenobi who stood just inside the ship, hands folded within his sleeves, the very picture of patience despite the fact that there was an Imperial party out looking for someone, most likely the both of them.

Strangely enough it wasn't a demand, or a sarcastic order, or even a request underlined with a threat of bodily harm, but an honest, gentle question that spoke of no danger in refusing. It seemed so out of place with their current situation he wanted to laugh, but it was

there nevertheless waiting for an answer, waiting for Luke to make a choice that damned him no matter what he decided.

Imperial troops or a complete stranger?

Decisions, decisions . . .

Biting his lip, Luke took a step forward and joined Obi-Wan on the ship.

After setting up the pre-ignition sequence in the cockpit, Obi-Wan moved back into the tiny but clean cabin space where the boy stood looking completely lost and in desperate need of a bath, some water, food, and sleep.

He smiled reassuringly at him trying to ignore the ridged posture, the faint trembling, and wide eyes-- pupils so large with barely controlled panic they blotted out the familiar blue.

"Well, Luke you're a bit worse for wear but it's nothing some soap and water won't mend," Kenobi said, breaking the tense silence gently. "First door on your right," he gestured as he stowed the bags safely out of the way.

The boy started suddenly as if coming awake after a short nap. "You-You mean *_now_*?" he asked incredulously.

"You have a more suitable time in mind?" Obi-Wan retorted archly trying to hide his amusement. "Go on."

Blinking in surprise Luke backed up a few steps before darting towards the indicated room obeying on instinct.

Letting a sad smile touch his lips Obi-Wan shook his head and went back to the cockpit having received his clearance to depart, false ID passing Imperial inspection, Vader still unaware of his presence. Carefully and as causally as he could, he nudged his appropriated ship out of its berth and out of the gravity pull of the spaceport towards the shipping lanes. There was a faint, surprising tug at his awareness and he turned and saw the child hidden in the shadow of the doorway, watching him silently. He hadn't even heard the boy approach.

"Sit down Luke," he inclined his head to the copilot's seat. Hesitation was only momentary; fear of him seemed a distant second to the wonders of space travel and piloting.

Why am I not surprised he thought wryly as he watched from the corner of his eye as Luke's blue eyes drank in everything. The little thief had managed to wash his hands and scrub most of the dirt of his face, but his hair was a disheveled mess and his clothing was inherently contrary to cleanliness, something Luke seemed completely oblivious to.

Well it wasn't exactly what he had in mind but it would do for now. A bath would have to wait; Luke certainly wasn't going to let him scrub what appeared to be months of dust and dirt from his skin any time soon, nor was Obi-Wan going to press such physical contact for a long

while yet. Luke was wound so tight one misstep would probably ignite pure and ugly chaos. The little thief surreptitiously watched him as if any moment he expected Obi-Wan to beat him senseless or worse. The Knight kept carefully out of arms reach, his movements slow, obvious, and as unthreatening as he could make them, but he couldn't just leave it at that. Master Yoda would know the best way to proceed, and Obi-Wan decided that their only course of action was to head for Dagobah.

He felt Luke shift nervously in his seat beside him and waited patiently for the boy to speak as they passed the shipping lanes.

"Which one?" Luke asked quietly, risking displeasure by breaking the silence, tearing his eyes away from the view port to glance over at the stranger.

"Hmm?" the man replied, hands and attention still focused on the controls as the ship slid out of the system slowly to avoid any unwanted attention.

"Which one are we going to?" Luke pointed out at the star field in clarification.

"That one," Ben replied with a quick smile, pointing to a silvery blue dot that glowed far distant from the bright center of the galactic core.

Satisfied, Luke sat back, suddenly drained, yet at the same time exhilarated as if all of the day's insane events were natural: sitting here with a complete stranger who knew his name, who was running from soldiers and the Dark Man, whose pocket he'd tried to pick, whose voice he thought he had heard in his head . . . He supposed he should be frightened, distant, uncooperative because this man could be a murderer and worse, but for some reason this all felt right the way *_Home_* never did and to top it all off he was in space again.

Space could be Home.

Luke continued to watch the black field until they had successfully entered hyperspace, the stars becoming streaks of indigo blue as the ship streamed past them. Pulling his eyes away at last from the hypnotic dizzying spectacle that he had always felt when space traveling but never actually seen, he turned to regard his strange unexpected companion with quizzical silence, until finally: "Who are you? I mean," Luke hastily held up his hands trying to clarify his question, brow drawn in thought "Besides your name, who?"

"You mean what do I do?" Obi-Wan asked helpfully, sparing the child a quiet glance as he checked various indicators around him with the practical ease of a well accomplished pilot.

"No," Luke shook his head, frowning in thought, "I mean *_who_* are you."

Obi-Wan turned his full attention to his young passenger. *_Did Luke understand the insight he shows with such a question, or is he like his father, instinctive in his grasp of the Force?_* Quickly he pushed such thoughts aside to be examined closer at a later date.

"A Jedi Knight," he replied softly, the simple title heavy with memories. After a long moment he continued, letting a hint of humor touch his words. "I don't suppose you've ever heard of them."

An old memory rose in a woman's soft, sad voice, the cadence of storytelling as dusk fell someplace safe and warm, with someone Luke loved to watch over him, someone beside him; kin, a best friend, a partner in mischievous crime . . .

(. . . .And the brave Jedi Master and his apprentice drew their swords of light and fought the demon with all their strength while the Queen rushed to save her people and her brave new allies from the invaders. . .)

"Your father was a Jedi Knight, too," Obi-Wan continued startling the boy out of his thoughts with that portent announcement. The Knight watched him carefully now, gauging his reaction.

"Father?" Luke echoed blankly.

"Yes Luke, father," he assured his young charge, eyes suddenly alive with private humor.

"You had to have come from somewhere."

"You-you knew him?" he asked tentatively not wanting to give into even the faintest hope, a healthy bit of confusion in his tone.

"Very well." Obi-Wan nodded slowly "He was my student."

Luke stared at him for a long moment trying to figure out if this was the truth or merely some story spun by this stranger. He didn't trust him, not by a long shot. Life had conspired to rob Luke of his faith in all adults and most children. Their word was as good as worthless as far as he was concerned. But this man, this Jedi knew his name, used it with familiarity, had used it more in one day than Luke had heard it spoken or even thought of in years.

Kenobi was just telling some story like most spacer did. Albeit the little pickpocket had to admit that this was a bit more elaborate than he was used to, and Luke had heard some very inventive tales around the space ports. But this . . . this knowledge called to him like a siren's song he could not ignore. He had to know more if indeed this Jedi Knight knew his father as he claimed.

"Why did he leave?" Luke asked finally, a question that had burned within him for a long time. If the man was telling the truth he would answer. "Why didn't he want me o-or . . Why?"

There was surprisingly no anger in the boy's voice, no sense of betrayal, no sadness. There was only a weary acceptance of perceived abandonment and a hint of challenge. Obi-Wan puzzled this for a moment before tentatively attributing it to the way the child had been living (if you could call it that, and Kenobi certainly didn't) for the last couple of years. The Force only knew what had happened to pull him away from Alderaan and his sister after his mother's death. Luke had no memory of Anakin to speak of, perhaps not even the

fanciful dreams of childhood. Those too had been stolen from him by circumstance. Kenobi turned in his chair and leaned forward on his knees facing the pickpocket and tried to explain the actions of a parent the boy neither knew nor particularly dwelled upon with anything except stoicism until he had brought the subject up.

"He didn't leave Luke," Obi-Wan said quietly, willing the boy to believe him, believe in something. "He didn't abandon you. He never would have, ever."

(. . . And the strong Jedi Knight and his dearest friend and Master were called away and he kissed his wife in secret farewell and left to fight and guard peace and justice throughout the galaxy . . .)

Luke sat back and looked away out at the stars. That was unexpected! The people back *_Home_* told him he'd been left purposefully by his parents because of the Evil inside him, that it was all his fault, that they hadn't wanted him, that he'd been the cursed child, the spawn of a demon, and they certainly didn't want him around their family. Kenobi's words were something completely new. "Then what happened?" Luke asked suddenly anxious to know, to hear proof of the stranger's words of his father's care.

Oh Force! How do I put this? Obi-Wan thought desperately. Master Yoda and what was left of the Council during the Purges had long ago forbidden the Skywalker children to know the truth about their parentage until fully trained. Even Padme agreed to that, but the knight could only see that it was a lie he was about to tell the boy, a boy who desperately needed someone he could trust again. Swallowing hard he opened himself, his mind to the power that shimmered around him and every living and nonliving entity in the universe and let it guide his words.

"There was . . . another Jedi, another student of mine named Darth Vader who fell to evil."

(. . . And a great black pall fell over the stars, crushing and dominating all. The Light that was the Jedi was blown out even as the Knights stood bravely in the path of death and destruction making their noble sacrifice to halt the tides of darkness . . .)

"The Dark Man," Luke breathed as the familiar voice inside him fell silent, eyes snapping back to meet the Knight's. "Back at port."

Obi-Wan blinked in surprise at the insight the boy showed and sat up slowly. "Yes Luke." He took a deep breath and let the damning words come. "He betrayed and murdered your father."

Luke Skywalker looked at the Jedi for a long moment, jaw clenched as he took the news, before looking away back at the star field that filled the front port as it slowly shivered as the ship entered hyperspace.

"Hey now," a concerned tenor broke through his thoughts and he stiffed reflexively. Luke opened his eyes and ducked his head a little so that he could see the Knight who was leaning over the

consol to peer beneath it. "What are you doing under there?"

Luke blinked in bewilderment. "I'm . . . sitting."

Obi-Wan favored him with a faint smile as he dropped to his knees, pushing the chair aside so he could better see the boy who sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped tight around himself in a concentrated effort to vanish into the darkness.

"I can see that Luke," he said, a touch of humor coloring his words before confusion took over "Why are you sitting *_under_* the consol?" he clarified patiently.

Luke didn't know how to answer that question. The Jedi wanted him to stay in the cabin or the cockpit and out of the cargo hold while they flew to this Master Yoda person's planet. He had reluctantly followed the Knight back into the habitat area of the tiny ship after the Jedi had sought him out amid the empty cargo containers, and found a place to sit.

"Why don't you come out?" Obi-Wan coaxed gently, moving aside a little to give the boy room to scuttle out without having to brush against him. "There is plenty of room in the cabin. You don't have to hide under furniture or in the hold."

Hesitation twisted the boy's brow, hands clenching and unclenching unconsciously. "Don't want to be a bother," he said at last in a low voice.

With a slight shake of the head Obi-Wan sighed. "You aren't Luke," he assured the little thief. "Come on out now, alright? I need some help up in the cockpit anyway."

Curiosity, surprise, and disbelief warred in the boy's eyes. "You do?"

With a practiced shrug of feigned nonchalance, Obi-Wan shifted back on his feet and stood watching the child from the corner of his eye. "Someone has to watch the ship while I clean up and get us something to eat."

Tentatively Luke eased out from his hiding place, scrambling hurriedly to his feet as he faced the Knight. "You're gonna have to show me sir," he admitted reluctantly, bracing himself against the edge of the consol as if he expected to be beaten for his admission of ignorance.

"It would be my pleasure," Obi-Wan said with a smile, inwardly winching at the body language the boy used. "And you may call me Ben, Luke." he added as he led the way back to the cockpit.

After a moment of disbelief passed, Luke hurried after him.

Wet.

The planet was warm and wet. Each breath was a marked difference from the over-

filtered, dusty, smoky air of space ports, cantinas, and cargo holds of transports.

"Be careful Luke, stay close," Kenobi warned as stepped back a ways to give the boy room to jump down from the hatch, since physically helping him was out of the question.

Luke was surprised by their destination, even more so by the way the Jedi was willing to take him along and not leave him locked up on the ship. The planet seemed like one gigantic, muddy, insect-filled, deadly dangerous swamp.

He couldn't wait to go exploring.

But Obi-Wan, Ben as he also invited Luke to call him during the trip instead of sir, seemed to be serious in his order that he not wander. So with a sigh he suppressed the longing to climb a particularly gnarled tree as the man led him through the muck, out of generous consideration to the knight. He certainly hoped Obi-Wan realized that he was making a very large, very unusual concession by even *_being_* here let alone listening to the man with his strange ideas about sleeping and eating and washing.

They avoided the one path in the area and scrambled over roots and around sinkholes with ease. Obi-Wan certainly knew his way around this place. He must come to visit this Master Yoda person often Luke thought. Luke still wasn't sure about Obi-Wan though, or this Master Yoda person. There had to be a nasty, unavoidable catch.

In his experience there was always a catch.

Luke's dark musings were cut short when Obi-Wan stopped their progress. He looked around and realized that the mist had parted and they stood before a tiny domed hovel crawling with moss and slimy plants. "Wait here," Obi-Wan instructed quietly as he gathered up his robes and ducked into the tiny doorway.

"Master Yoda."

A small wizened green figure turned from his bubbling stew that filled the air with a smell that reminded the Knight of when he was a boy, just a hotheaded trainee when the ancient Jedi Master had taken him aside to lecture and train him in private. The venerable teacher looked up, eyes widening as he saw his former pupil before him. He had not felt him arrive; Obi-Wan had shielded their approach even from the only other remaining Jedi out of caution. Quickly for one of such age, Yoda hopped out into his living space to stand before the kneeling Jedi, touching his head gently with one hand.

"Obi-Wan," he said fondly in greeting, that one name carrying a hundred shades of meaning and emotion. Both their exile's had weighed heavily on them; the galaxy no longer resonated with thousands of their brothers and sisters within the Force. There were only two; two Jedi and two Sith. Yoda's attention turned suddenly and sharply from Kenobi to focus outside. Ears rose in surprise, recognition was instant. "Ohh. The boy?"

Bowing his head Obi-Wan hurried to explain the turn of events. "I found him near Coruscant Master, at the Ithorian Port. He tried to pick my pocket. When I caught him, he tried make me forget I ever saw

him, and . . ." The Jedi trailed off, jaw clenching as he remembered his failure.

"Vader was there," Yoda finished for him, lips pursed in thought. "His sister?"

"Safe on Alderaan as far as I know Master."

The ancient teacher turned towards the door. "How is he?"

Obi-Wan let out an exhausted, frustrated sigh as he ran one distracted hand through his hair. "Terrified" he admitted, heart sinking as his mind contemplated what that meant for the child, for the galaxy. "Completely bewildered. Barely controlled panic. He spend a good portion of the trip here under furniture and in supply closets no matter what I said to reassure him. When I caught him and brought him with me he thought I was going to . . . harm him."

Yoda seemed to wilt at the idea, eyes closing, hanging his head. It was unbearable and sickening to consider the scars mental and physical the child carried, what it meant for his training, for the future.

"And yet . . ." Obi-Wan offered carefully. "He did not run when he could have Master. He stayed near, didn't leave."

"Not good this is." Yoda began to pace, stick tapping emphasizing his words. "Safe the children had to be. Safe and loved. The same situation as their father we did not want."

"Master I need to find out what happened. Perhaps with his sister things could be still remedied. The answers are on Alderaan."

"Answers also with the boy" he reminded the Knight sternly not willing to dismiss the boy in favor of his sister without seeing for himself. "Hmm." Yoda considered this for a moment, turning his attention back to the child outside, the Force rippling in his grasp and Obi-Wan knew that the future lay out before him in all its myriad possibilities. "The boy will stay here," he said at last. "Go to Organa you shall, but leave the girl there. Come back for him you will."

"Yes Master." Bowing again Obi-Wan ducked outside again to find the boy crouched down, watching in rapt interest the progress of a rytha snake over moss-slicked stones.

"Luke?" he called softly gaining his attention instantly. The child stood brushing his hands against his tunic as he did, taking a few steps closer to the Jedi and his rather diminutive companion. "Luke this is the Jedi Master Yoda. Master, Luke Skywalker."

Luke nodded his head respectfully at the old creature without thinking. There was something about the green skinned Jedi that reminded him of Obi-Wan, of that voice he thought he heard in his head during his frantic search for the airlock.

The Jedi, Yoda, studied him, green eyes seeming to take in everything at once. He murmured softly to himself before speaking, the Force stirring with his words. "Be at peace young one. Nothing do we

require from you. Safe here you are."

The boy regarded both Jedi for a long moment, uncertainty radiating from him strongly before he drew back into himself, becoming unreadable. Yoda and Obi-Wan shared a glance and then muttering softly to himself the Master went back into his home.

"Luke?"

Skywalker's eyes snapped to meet his and Obi-Wan continued now that he had his attention. "Luke I want you to stay here with Master Yoda while I take care of some business."

"You're leaving?!"

Kenobi inwardly winced at the tone, the fear. The boy had tensed so suddenly he looked about ready to snap and he was edging away out of sheer instinct. "Only for a little while, a week at most," he hurriedly explained as gently as he could. "I'm coming back Luke. I won't forget, I won't." He knelt in the mud wishing he could reach out and calm the boy instead of having to keep well out of arm's reach. "Master Yoda will take care of you." Obi-Wan nearly smiled at the scowl of disgust that Luke shot at him for that statement. He raised his hands in apology. "I know you can take care of yourself but humor me and stay here with him and wait till I return."

"No." Luke said flatly. This was taking consideration too far. He couldn't just leave him, he couldn't! The mere thought of it filled his heart with unexplained dread. "No. No. No."

You *_can't!*_ I-I don't under--" He broke off his words sharply, his voice quivering, betraying him.

Luke's eyes were wide with panic; he hadn't really be thinking about where his decisions were leading him since he'd tried to pick his pocket back on the Ithorian port. He'd been letting instinct and feelings guide him, naturally reassured by the presence of a Jedi as was expected with an untrained Force user. Obi-Wan had provided balance and much needed security; it was natural, it was way the Jedi had worked for millennia, Master and Padawan drawn to each other through the Force despite extenuation circumstance like Empires and Stormtroopers, Toydarians and slavery, AgriCorps and rebellion. While Obi-Wan was planning on coming back all the boy could see was that he was being abandoned again. Obi-Wan cursed the turn of events internally; the crafty little thief was vulnerable, uncertain and now very much afraid no matter how unconcerned, unneeding, and brave he pretended to be.

Putting as much certainty and calm as he could in his voice he sought to reassure him.

"You will understand in time. I'll be back soon." He stood, unmindful of the mud on his robe and his clothes. "Don't run Master Yoda ragged while I'm gone," he told Luke with a smile "He's over 800 years old."

Luke stood there, surprise on his face as the Knight ducked back inside the hovel obviously to say his good-byes. They didn't take long because Obi-Wan came out again a few moments later along with the 800 year old Master and then departed back through the swamp

towards the ship. Luke watched him go in silence, wondering why he felt like someone had just taken to strangling him, why he should care in the first place, why he listened to him and stayed behind when he could easily sneak back onboard.

"Back he will come young one."

"Like I care'" Luke muttered under his breath. He wouldn't care, he *_wouldn't_.* Caring was for idiots, idiots who got in bad situations fast and lived painfully. Caring only caused you trouble, it was nearly as stupid as trusting someone. The dumb feeling would go away he assured himself staunchly, he'd best deal with the situation at hand, survive the *_now_.*

Turning to face the Jedi Master, Luke wracked his brain trying to think of what to say to him. This wasn't a spaceport and he didn't seem to be alone anymore (though not by *_his_* choice) so he had to say something. An old memory prompted him, long forgotten, long unneeded but somehow appropriate.

Bowing he said, "I thank you for your hos-hospitality Master Yoda."

Murmuring in what seemed like approval if the upraised ears meant anything he nodded in return "Welcome you always are," he said and for some strange reason he sounded like he actually meant it, not just some pointless meaningless adult platitude. Then motioning the boy to follow he lead the way back into his home. Luke had to duck only a little to enter and found himself in a warm, glowing room. There were roots and animals, snakes and other lizards crawling all over what little furniture there was. All the colors seemed faded and muted, green and brown. The air was filled with water and the very odd scent of something that Luke's stomach knew without a doubt was food. But despite its shabby interior and mud ball location it was much better than he was used to and he found himself relaxing despite himself. The room was warm and he was very tired. He hadn't slept well on the ship, in truth he hadn't slept at all preferring to keep a nightly vigil on his traveling companion. Now the tiny house pulled at his resolve to keep watch insistently.

"Approve you do?" the little gnome of a Jedi asked cocking his head to regard the boy thoughtfully.

"It's more my size." Luke admitted since it seemed as if the Master required an answer.

Yoda gave a little laugh and scuttled his way over to the kitchen. "Size matters not."

Luke moved cautiously toward the burning glow of the fire, mesmerized by its light and warmth all the while keeping careful watch out of the corner of his eye on the Jedi. The flames danced cheerily, undaunted by the planet's inherent dampness. "Careful young Skywalker," Yoda warned when Luke reached out to the brightness. He pulled back his hand and contented himself with sinking down before the fire keeping his back to the wall the door a direct line on his right, the Jedi before him. Master Yoda came and handed him a bowl of something green and brown much like the rest of the planet but experience had taught Luke not to be picky; food was food and he ate hurriedly.

His bowl scrapped clean Luke stared at the fire drawing his knees up to his chest. "Obi-Wan said he'd come back." The words escaped of their own volition but he was too tired to care what anyone thought.

"He will," the Jedi replied quietly.

"He said he would, he said he wouldn't forget." *_But he will_* Luke knew with a certainty, shivering despite the fire, *_Everyone always forgets, because of me, because of me_.*

"Hmmm."

Luke turned his head away from the flames having the strangest feeling that this ancient being had heard him, heard his thoughts. "Rest now. A long day it has been," Yoda urged softly. "Night comes."

2. Homecoming Chapter 2

Bail Organa dropped his light slate on his desk the moment the familiar robed figure stepped out from one of the side doors. Pushing aside his curiosity about how the man had entered his private office in the first place, he stood hurriedly, coming round his desk to face the man, worry etched on his brow. After all it wasn't every day the last remaining Jedi Knight, General and hero of the Clone Wars visited the elected leader of Alderaan. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Obi-Wan returned his gaze, green clear eyes hard and sharp. "I was planning on asking you. Where's the boy Bail?"

Organa sighed, Obi-Wan was not in a good mood. Albeit his face was a perfect mask of Jedi serenity, but that is all it was, a mask. The eyes gave Kenobi away every time. "He's dead, I thought you must have felt it. I expected you to come after I got the message from Ministry--"

"He's not dead," the Knight interrupted folding his hands together beneath his sleeves. "I found him in a spaceport near the galactic core of all places, alone. My question is what exactly was he doing separated from his sister? I take it you did separate them after their mother's death despite her wishes."

Bail sat back on the edge of his desk, mind trying to comprehend the number of shocks it had just received. "Alive--?" he breathed.

"Answer the question Bail."

Bail swallowed. Jedi didn't get angry as a rule, but it certainly looked like his old comrade was angry. "We thought it best, for security reasons," he added hastily. He didn't like where this was going. The Jedi was not pleased. "The girl had more passive abilities than Luke, you even said so. But together with his strength she began to have . . . flukes. It grew dangerous, hard to keep secret once

their mother began dying. Skies above, Vader comes here! We thought it best to separate them and place the boy with another family."

"And these guardians?"

Bail ran a weary hand across his face as he thought back. "It had to be done legally to avoid suspicion. When Senat-- Padme brought them here she created identities for them within a secured system apart from the Imperial Net and so when we offered to adopt the girl we had to turn Luke over to Child Ministry Services. We couldn't arrange it ourselves, it would look too suspicious. We had no choice."

"Continue," the Jedi urged, voice impassive where his first were strained to the breaking.

"I received a message about a year later from Ministry. There had been a fire at one of the temporary foster homes. Luke was presumed dead."

"Presumed? There was no investigation?"

Organa shook his head as he walked back around the desk to sit heavily in his seat. "No. Ministry was being investigated itself at the time. There were . . . rumors of mishandling of children within Ministry. After six cycles the Empire took over." He looked up at a lost for how to continue. "I thought you knew, would have felt. . ."

Kenobi stood, eyes closed, jaw clenched tight as he processed this information. "How soon after their mother's death did you separate them?"

"The same night."

"So you split them up. Did it ever occur to you Bail that the abilities Leia manifested would have ended when her mother passed on and she was allowed time to grieve?" The rebuke was softly spoken, but there was knowledge behind it, and certainty and Bail realized the depth of his mistake. Before he had time to berate himself or even offer an apology, the door behind them burst open.

A short blur, all skirts and hair ribbons came flying by and leapt into Organa's lap. "Da! Look what I made!"

With fond sternness Bail stood and let his adopted daughter down. "Leia, remember your manners. We have a guest."

"Oh." Straightening visibly she turned to the Jedi who stood as well and offered the little princess a bow.

"Princess Leia," he murmured, noting her blush to be treated so courteously by a grownup. *_She looks like Padme!*_ he thought, *_And Luke looks like Anakin._* The Force definitely had a sense of irony about it, that much was certain.

"Hello," she said, shyly. "Who are you?"

Obi-Wan offered her a slight smile. "An old friend."

"Welcome to Alderaan," she said with a curtsey. She then turned her attention to the man she called father and tugged a little on his robes. "I'm sorry I came in without knocking," she apologized with a loud whisper. "But I made something for you." Grinning irrepressibly she pressed a piece of molded clay into Bail's hands. Before he could respond she slipped away, hesitating for a moment before the Jedi, looking at him quizzically before exiting and closing the door behind her.

Bail stared down at the tiny bowl in his hands, painted bright blue. Slowly he placed it on his desk and then looked up at the Knight, an apology ready on his lips.

Kenobi raised his hand to forestall any attempt, eyes softening shoulders slumping in exhaustion, "You did the only thing you thought you could, you acted with their best interests at heart."

Bail was grateful upon hearing his words knowing the Knight would not have offered them unless he meant them. There was no time to browbeat himself, what was done was done. In this new galaxy there was little time for regrets, only action and survival. "So how is Luke?" he began tentatively, wondering at the difference in the twins. They had been very close. "How did he. . . ?"

Obi-Wan sank into one of the soft plush chairs beside Bail's desk, resting his elbows on his knees, eyes on the floor. "I don't know how," he admitted "He hasn't spoken about Alderaan. I'm not exactly sure if he even remembers. It has been several years."

"On his own?"

"He's been on his own since his mother died Bail. Being placed in Ministry Services away from his sister prepared him well for life off-planet obviously."

Organa winced at the reminder of his mistake but knew from long acquaintance that Obi-Wan was being practical not hurtful, there was no rancor in his tone. "So he's all right."

Obi-Wan turned to look at the other at last. "He survived."

Upside down the planet of Dagobah looked pretty much the way it did right side up Luke concluded at last after intense observation swinging from the great gnarled tree he'd been itching to climb since he first landed.

The sky was gray as had been yesterday and the day before that and the water was murky brown so it didn't really matter which way you viewed the world, it was all very much the same. But he liked it, he liked the lack of technology, the lack of people, the lack of constant demands both physical and emotional. He would almost say that he could feel a lack of noise inside his head but that sounded stupid so he banished the thought.

Master Yoda didn't seem to mind too much what he did, never pressed, kept his distance and made some really odd tasting yet satisfying gruel three times a day. He let Luke go wherever he wish after the

first day of explaining the dangers of the swamp. Luke had adapted quickly. He avoided sinkholes and poisonous snakes and deep water. The only time the ancient master had stopped him from going where he willed was at that cold, dark tree. The very air around the twisted thing hung heavy and Luke had stood petrified before it for who knew how long until Yoda had arrived out of the mist and had lead him away.

"What is it?" he had asked in a harsh whisper. "What's there?"

Yoda had pursed his lips in thought for a moment before turning his kind eyes back to the little thief. "It is a place of evil. Ready to see it you are not."

While usually such restriction rankled him on general principle, Luke had seen this one for what it was; an honest warning. Yoda seemed unwilling to offer any more information but he was willing to talk when Luke wanted to and willing to leave him alone when he didn't. He told the most incredible stories in that odd backwards way of his. They reminded him of the ones someone, perhaps his mother he figured absently, had told him when he was little about the Jedi and their enemies the Sith and how they fought over the millennia. All in all it was perhaps the most relaxing, unharried time he had spent as far back as he could remember.

The ground began trembling with sub harmonics. Luke twisted around from his perch, nearly falling off until he regained his balance with one hand on the branch above. Looking up he saw the faint glow of ion engine's amid the mist, the telltale sign of a ship approaching.

Letting go of the branch with his hand Luke swung back and forth before executing a fairly decent cherry drop landing right side up and on two feet amid the muck of the swamp.

Hesitantly climbing across the roots he moved back into the shadow of the twisted trunk, watching cautiously, ready to turn and hide in any one of the number of places he had out of habit and instinct discovered and furnished around the bog just in case. It wasn't that he didn't trust the Jedi, it was just . . . that he didn't trust them, he admitted without remorse. One did not feel guilty about self-preservation.

The ship landed rather artfully amid the swamp, managing to find a firm spot amid the spongy ground. The hatch opened with a pop and out jumped Obi-Wan Kenobi, nimble as a meerk cat.

Luke stepped away from the tree and into the Jedi's line of sight before he could help himself, eyes wide with surprise and confusion. "You!"

Easily crossing the various sinkholes around his landing sight, the Knight shot him a grin. "Who were you expecting?"

"You-you came back?" Luke said shaking his head in bewilderment as Ben came to a halt a few paces away. It didn't make sense, no one ever came back, not for him.

"Of course I came back," Kenobi replied gently wondering how long it would be before Luke would truly believe anything anyone said to him.

Motioning for the boy to follow he headed towards Yoda's hut, Luke beside him if at a slight distance.

Master Yoda sat perched on a decomposing log near his home chewing on the edge of his gimmer stick thoughtfully. He nodded in greeting to Obi-Wan's bow and Luke got the distinct feeling whatever would follow would be private so he held back and then turned and hurried towards the rather fair sized pond off to the west.

If they wanted to talk about him, fine! Luke thought to himself. It wasn't the first time and *_he_* certainly didn't care!

But if they thought he would simply do whatever they said, they were very wrong.

"Take him as your Padawan you must."

"No."

"He will have no other."

"No, he stays with you. I cannot take him. Neither should you. His sister is our only hope now." Obi-Wan folded his arms across his chest uncaring if his defiance was a sign of disrespect.

Yoda shook his head. "Take him yet, I cannot. Sounds of the past repeat."

The Knight fought to keep anger out of his voice at the mention of his master. "This is different."

"No different!" Yoda insisted banging his cane with a sharp rap against the log.

"My last apprentice went out and purged the Jedi from the galaxy and toppled the Republic!" Kenobi countered hotly refusing to be bullied.

"Sith influence this boy will not have. Know we do, our enemy."

Obi-Wan shook his head ruefully, calming his thoughts, trying to have the ancient Jedi understand his reasons. "Luke is . . . too far gone to ever bond with anyone, let alone heal! His scars run deeper than I can possibly imagine, deeper than Anakin's! I cannot take the boy Master Yoda and live this all over again. If the children hadn't been born in the first place, if Amidala hadn't been pregnant I would have simply gone after Vader and faced my destiny. I'm on borrowed time as it is. I am no teacher. I cannot help him." He threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "I couldn't even help Anakin!"

Yoda watched impassively, unmoved. "Needs you he does. Need *_him_* you do."

"No. I've done this before Master and we all know what happened! You warned me yourself! You want me to make the same mistake again? To risk what precious little is left on the boy?"

"Qui-Gon was willing to take the risk." Yoda reminded him.

"Qui-Gon shouldn't have taken me at all!" Obi-Wan spat bitterly in return. "He should have left me on Bandomeer. You want me to do it again? There's not too much else left in the galaxy I can screw up!" he said, a touch of hysteria in his words. He couldn't help it, the pain he had felt when Anakin, his son and dearest friend turned and slaughtered them all tore at his heart. He had loved the boy, still did. His treacherous heart would probably always cling to his Padawan, just as it did the memory of the man who had raised him. Perhaps he was not ultimately responsible, but he wasn't going through it again, not ever again.

"Events occurred as they did!" Yoda reminded him sternly, his harsh words bringing Obi-Wan back to himself. "Choices everyone made, yours in keeping with the Light always. No fault there was regardless of who trained the Chosen One. Destined this is, the Force must be balanced within him. Started then with Anakin unfolding still in Vader, in Luke. Together through those two what the Force wills, will occur."

"My second student repairs the damage of the first, Master?" he asked with a pain filled smile as he sank to his knees uncaring of the mud.

Yoda hopped down off the log and stood before him, eyes revealing that the pain was shared between them; Obi-Wan had never suffered alone. "Lost learners I have to the Dark. Lost many many to war and battle. Lost everyone we both did. Not over yet. Work to be done there is, fulfill our heavy duty as the Force wills."

Obi-Wan sighed, hanging his head, searching for the strength inside him. He reached out through the Force, searching himself, searching the child. It spoke to him as it always did, as it had when he comforted the little thief at the port. The Force came easily, so very willingly to his call. Raising his eyes to meet Master Yoda's he admitted the truth of what he saw.

"It draws me to him, to both of them. He heard my voice back at the port," he admitted at last. "The Force is never wrong. I cannot deny this bond anymore than I can deny the one I hold with Anakin. He was my apprentice, like my own and his son . . . "

Silence stretched between them for a long moment. "Alone father and son cannot be." Yoda spoke at last, The Master's face was solemn and certain. "If care for them you do, take the boy and prepare him, train him. Redemption of the all that were lost he yet may be. And then," Yoda finished quietly. "Join the others we may."

"Luke?"

The boy hesitated for a moment hearing the voice behind him but then turned his attention back to the pond and attempted once again to top his previous score at skipping rocks across the scummy surface. Still, the Knight probably expected an answer Luke realized. Sighing, jaw tightening in remembered anger, he called out; "Are you done arguing over what you're going to do to me?"

"Luke we're not going to *_do_* anything to you." Ben replied gently for what felt like the thousandth time as he stepped over a tkryx lizard burrowing in the muck.

Scowling the little thief turned around ready to confront the man over the suspicions the ghost had raised within him.

"You went *_Home_* didn't you? To talk to *_Them_!*"

"I went to Alderaan, yes." Obi-Wan admitted freely not missing the obvious emphasis in the boy's words.

Luke backed away from the knight, instinctively putting more distance between himself and perceived danger, hands clenched tight. "I'm not going back!" He announced, voice hard but there was desperation there too, a wild panic that Obi-Wan couldn't stand to see in a child's eyes.

"No, you're not," he affirmed quietly.

Luke's jaw dropped and he blinked in shock. That was a response he hadn't been expecting even after days of steady reassurances from Yoda, from Obi-Wan himself. He hadn't believed, not for an instant. But they had been telling him the truth. The truth, what a novelty! Luke almost smiled, but instead old doubts that had kept him alive rose inside. Quickly shaking himself he asked "And you're not putting me with some other people are you? You aren't turning me back over to Ministry?"

"No." Obi-Wan said taking a seat on one of the numerous moss-covered rocks with a faint smile as he sent his calm assurance to the boy along their faint connection to quell his doubt and fear.

For a long moment Luke said nothing simply watched, gauging him. Finally coming to a decision he sat down a short distance from the man with a nod of approval worthy of any aristocrat, certainly worthy of his mother. "Good." Obi-Wan hid a smile.

"Can I ask you something sir?" Luke began, tone more hesitant as he tested this completely new view he had on the Knight.

Blinking slightly at the sudden honorific he nodded. "Of course." Obi-Wan allowed. He had a feeling this was to be the first in a long, long line of questions that would probably last for years. Part of him looked forward to it, while the rest of him could see only Anakin.

"Why did you bring me here? Why didn't you just leave me with Port Authority? Is it . . ." his voice dropped to an uncertain hush. "Is it because you knew my father?"

Obi-Wan was silent for a long moment as he considered how to reply to that. "Do you remember when I caught you the words you whispered, over and over again?"

"Yees." Luke drew the word out carefully, eyes narrowing in suspicion. He wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"You expected me to let go and forget you existed didn't you?" he pressed.

The boy shrugged tightly. "Well, yeah that's what usually happens. But I don't get caught often."

"Once all it takes Luke." Obi-Wan admonished lightly. "What you attempted to do, cloud my mind, is an ability granted to you through the Force."

"The Force?" he repeated in confusion. "What is this Force everyone keeps talking about?"

"The Force is what gives a Jedi Knight his power. It is an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together."

"You brought me here because of *_that_*" he asked incredulously.

"Among other things." Obi-Wan agreed in amusement.

Brow furrowed Luke countered the statement. "But it didn't work on you."

"No it didn't because I'm Jedi." the Knight explained patiently. "I've been trained to use it to protect myself, and I will teach you how as well and so will Master Yoda. But it's worked on other people before I'd wager, the weak minded."

"Yes." Obi-Wan waited, wanting the boy to figure it out on his own, make the connections, see the reasoning behind this crazy trip a stranger had dragged him on to an uncivilized swamp. He didn't have to wait very long, the child was as quick as his father. "You'll teach me?"

"If that is what you want."

"To be a-a Jedi Knight." Luke said hesitatingly.

"Yes."

Luke thought back, to the half remembered stories of bravery and goodness that soft voice used to tell every night. Jedi were the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy and he, he was a runaway, and an accomplished thief. He was a no good, no account freak and *They* hated him for it, hated him for being Evil and dirty. And Jedi were good, not Evil, that much he thought he knew. Jedi never let anyone . . . but he shrank away from those thoughts quickly, burying them deep. "Are you sure this will work?" he asked with honest skepticism.

Obi-Wan tried not to laugh. "Yes Luke, I'm sure."

"I'm a pickpocket." Luke warned darkly in what seemed to be an effort to ward the Knight away from the task of instructing him.

"I realize that," Ben said with a fond smile.

Luke fidgeted for a moment. "I can't even read," he confessed not looking at the Jedi, holding his breath, waiting for the disappointment, the disgust, the violence.

A hand reached out as if to touch his shoulder, but made no contact as if suddenly remembering to keep its distance. For some reason Luke didn't feel the urge to pull away though he reflexively stiffened.

"You can learn," Kenobi offered softly. The boy seemed intent on proving his unworthiness. That was something Obi-Wan vowed to remedy soon if given the chance.

"You really want to teach me?" Luke asked anxiously.

"Yes." Kenobi assured him with a smile.

The boy's eyes narrowed dangerously as he regarded the Jedi. "You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Good." Luke nodded, the matter and all the talking concluded as far as he was concerned; time for action. "When do we start?"

Luke scrambled into the little hut intent on finding the Jedi Master. Locating him at last by his carefully tended fire, he knelt down and shared his news. "Obi-Wan says we're leaving Master Yoda. Are you coming too?"

"Stay here I will."

"Oh." Luke's face fell slightly. He wasn't exactly sure why but he rather hoped that the ancient gnome would come with them. There was something about him, about both Jedi that seemed so natural, so right. It felt good to be near them, almost safe.

The green eyes turned away from the dancing hissing flames to stare at the young one kindly. "See me again you shall young Padawan."

"Padawan?" he repeated in confusion. Too many new terms in one day. "My name's Luke."

"Know this I do." The old one smiled knowingly. Luke wondered how much he had seen, how much he *_knew_* being so very old. "Padawan means apprentice, learner, student. A title, rank among Jedi."

"Luke are you ready?" It was Obi-Wan, outside waiting for him.

"Coming sir!" he called in response, wondering at how easily he seemed to fit into this pattern, this life when only a few days ago he was stealing to survive. He shook his head as if to shake the thought loose. This could end as quickly as it began. He would not get comfortable, he reminded himself sternly He would not!

"Go with your Master." Yoda's voice brought him sharply out of his thoughts, demanding attention. "Learn much from him you can. Learn to listen, to be calm and trust in the Force. Banish anger and fear and

be strong you will. Alone you are not, never shall you be young Skywalker. Remember."

Luke nodded slowly. The words were more than just a good-bye, more than a dismissal, and he held them close. "I will, and I'll come back and see you."

"May the Force be with."

He stood and bowed as he had seen Obi-Wan do. "Thank you Master Yoda."

"Two stars." Luke murmured, amazed, leaning forward to stare out of the cockpit at the twin solar bodies as the ship dropped out of hyperspace with a lurch.

Obi-Wan glanced back over his shoulder at the boy who stood in the doorway. "It's a binary system," he explained easily as he altered course slightly so that they'd have a better view before landing. "They're called Tatoo I and Tatoo II. Not very original names . . ."

"Do-" Luke began hesitantly, taking a step forward, unsure whether to press. The Knight nodded for him to continue.

"Do all planets look likes this from space sir?"

Obi-Wan took in the barren dust colored globe that was to be a Skywalker's home once more. "You mean the color?" he asked. Luke nodded, eyes not leaving the star field or the planet hung amid the darkness.

"Only desert ones. There is very little water on Tatooine, rationing is important. I suggest we make use of the water still onboard before we sell the ship. You can go first."

With effort Luke pulled his eyes away from the view, puzzlement etched on his face. "Go first where?"

"Go take a shower," Ben prompted. "I've managed to find something a bit more clean for you to wear so you won't have to put on the same clothes again. They're in the cabin. Take your time." Kenobi said as he brought the ship into temporary synchronous orbit.

"Shower?" Luke asked aghast, with the same revulsion and disgust most people held for snakes or dead bugs. "But-but sir, we need the water--"

What was it with Skywalkers and water? Kenobi thought in bewilderment. But then he reminded himself firmly in some ways space was just as sterile and dry as a desert, and just as unforgiving. As odd as good water sense could be, it was invaluable given the boy's lifestyle. Obi-Wan hid a grin as he interrupted. "Yes Luke, shower. With hot water *_and_* soap."

Soap Luke blinked. "But I washed up before we ate last," he protested.

The Jedi turned around in his chair to face the boy, eyes filled with good-humor, bellying his firm no nonsense tone of voice. "Luke I'm not just talking about washing the back of your hands and some of your face. I'm talking about a shower, where even your hair gets wet and you come out clean. You do understand clean don't you?" he asked.

Luke nodded dumbly.

"Underneath all of this space dust, cobwebs, dirt, grime, grease, swamp mud, and the Force only knows what else I am *_sure_*, " Obi-Wan made a show of eyeing him sharply before continuing, "there is a blond-haired blue eyed boy named Luke Skywalker. I have yet to see him, but I expect to. Go on," he motioned.

Without another word the boy scrambled away. Obi-Wan turned back to the controls listening intently for a minute before yelling "Water, Luke! I do expect to hear the water running!"

There was a moments silence and then the familiar sound of the shower blocking out some rather creative muttered curses. Grinning broadly and shaking his head he watched the various tiny outposts on Tatooine slip from day to night as the planet turned.

"I'm getting too old for this." he muttered to himself with a rueful chuckle.

Obi-Wan landed the tiny craft with skill that spoke of long practice on the outskirts of one of the settlements. Shutting down the hyperdrive and the navigation computer he drew his cloak about him and headed for the tiny cabin.

Luke was pulling a tunic over his head that was at least three sizes too big, hands disappearing into the sleeves, his rake thin body drowning in the light gray fabric. Yanking the cloth away from his face he shot Kenobi a murderous glare in response to the Knight's obvious amusement, damp hair still an unqualified disaster but as expected a completely different color.

Smiling the Jedi gathered up the two bags. "I knew you were under there somewhere. Don't worry, you'll grow."

Luke muttered something incoherent under his breath but the sentiment was incredibly clear, before joining the Knight at the exit wondering what exactly Obi-Wan had meant by the word desert when describing the planet.

The hatch came open with a hiss of mixing atmospheres and Luke was immediately struck by the heat that reminded him of some of power cores at a few of the ports he visited. Obi-Wan drew up his hood and stepped out onto the glowing sands.

It was almost painfully bright. It had been too long since he'd spent anytime outdoors, Dagobah being the first. Now before him in almost every direction spread the brilliant fine sand and above him the most amazing blue sky. Taking a deep breath and feeling his throat dry immediately, his hair leached instantly of what little moisture was left, Luke resisted the urge to lick his lips and pulled up his

tunic's hood to shield himself from the glare and hurried off after the Jedi.

The town, if it could be called that was just as dusty and dilapidated. Strange beasts lumbered through the streets and a vast variety of different species yelled and argued and wandered about alone or in groups. Droids trundled about, beeping and whirling softly to one another. The dry baked air was filled with dialects; grunts, hisses, warbles, gurgles, and howls. Some were indecipherable and other Luke knew well enough to listen in on half a dozen conversations as he followed Obi-Wan through the tenth-rate marketplace.

They entered one of the few air-conditioned shops together, Obi-Wan heading up to speak to the lady at the counter, Luke carefully taking in the variety of the supplies she had in inventory. He wasn't usually allowed in stores, avoided them altogether at port; the shopkeepers didn't like his kind hanging around and he couldn't blame them. The ones that didn't mind runaways and pickpockets in their establishment were obviously looking for an easy mark themselves though of a decidedly darker nature. This time things were different though, Luke mused ignoring the rise and fall of the adults talking and bartering behind him. Water, rations, survival gear . . . There were a few other commodities, odds and ends for people who had houses, but he wasn't interested in that, he was too busy trying to figure out exactly how the climate would affect living requirements. Water was definitely going to be more important than food, he thought to himself. Claspng his hands together, thankful for his long sleeves, Luke edged closer to the merchandise, silent and deliberate in his intent.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat suddenly and loudly and Luke looked up guilty, suddenly very aware of what he was just about to do.

The Knight's back was still to him; he was still talking to the lady. Surprisingly he raised no fuss, but he did spare a glance over at the boy and simply raised his eyebrows, waiting. That was somehow worse than being called to task over his obviously suspicious behavior.

Swallowing hard, Luke wandered away from the stack of supplies and stood to the left of the Jedi in silence.

"So will that be everything Ben?" the tired looking shopkeeper asked in a bright voice, yellow slit eyes filming slightly as she blinked.

"Yes, thank you."

Packing up the few purchases into the satchel she looked down over the counter and catching sight of the boy began to coo. "Oh what an adorable little boy! Is he yours?"

Luke blinked in bewildered surprise at the sudden transformation and then shot her a glare of absolute indignation and disgust at her attempts to humiliate him publicly, which like any clueless adult she completely missed. Abandoning her packing she reached out to pat him on the head. "Aren't you just the sweetest thing?"

Resisting the urge to shout NO! at the top of his lungs, Luke ducked

away, darting behind Obi-Wan leaving him to deal with the crazy lady. He knew there was a good reason he preferred to stay dirty, people were far less likely to touch him.

"Aw! Shy is he?" she asked kindly as she finished packing their items and handed the bag to Kenobi.

"Not . . . exactly." Ben replied smothering his amusement. "Thank you for the news Tira." He turned and practically stepped on the boy who hovered just behind him.

"Any time!" she waved, glad to have shared some gossip, even if it was with that crazy old hermit. "Come back soon. You too sweetie!"

Luke certainly hoped not. Obi-Wan shot him a dry, knowing smile as he held the door open for the boy.

They made their way out of the tiny town and out into the dunes, the suns at their backs, in silence. The heat was oppressive, sometimes dizzying so their pace was slow. It was nearly nightfall, the sky turning a remarkable shade of indigo before Kenobi called a halt to their trek just as they rose over the edge of a dune. Luke nearly ran into the Knight, so intent he was on watching the sky darken and the first stars appear. He halted with a tired shuffle and stared up at the man in confusion.

He couldn't see his expression in the growing fringed darkness but Luke heard the smile in his voice.

"Welcome home Padawan."

It hadn't taken long to get settled; Luke had absolutely nothing in the way of belongings except a few odds and ends he had flitched and transferred to his new clothes after Obi-Wan disposed of the filthy old ones. The quarters the Jedi kept were leanly comfortable for a rare few, downright luxury for Luke. He actually had his own room, with a bed no less. He still wasn't exactly sure how he made it to the bed the first night; he had been so tired, but he woke there in the warm glow of dawn, only his boots off and resting under the bed.

He had warily sat up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes absently. The light came from the twin stars already beginning their scorching ascent into the sky. Cautiously he looked around. It was so still, so quiet. There was no noise outside of people, droids, ships, or generators. The peace was unnerving. Even the swamp planet had some sort of sound echoing in the thick air from all the creatures.

The only thing he could hear was coming from inside the dwelling. Pulling on his boots he had peeked out of the nearly closed door and out into the dim hallway. Seeing and sensing no movement Luke made his way down the corridor running his fingers along the cool stone wall as he went.

Another room, slightly larger was further down. There was a fresher tucked into one tiny room. As quietly as he could he opened the tap to a trickle and drank a handful of the lukewarm water and then

cupping his hands he took one handful to wash the dust off his face and run his fingers through his hair. Obi-Wan would probably insist anyway. He might as well get it over with. The former thief slipped back into the corridor and practically jumped off his skin when he heard a soft greeting.

"Good morning."

Luke turned and caught sight of the Knight leaning against the wall watching him. Long practice kept Luke from physically reacting as he replied without a tremor in his voice, but his heart pounded in his chest. The Jedi seemed to see right through him and looked slightly abashed.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Pushing himself off the wall he rubbed his chin ruefully before gesturing towards the common area and what Luke supposed was the kitchen. "Breakfast is ready."

After a long moment of staring Obi-Wan realize waiting for Luke to walk before him was like waiting for a tropical heatwave on Hoth and so he went first, resisting the urge to look over his shoulder as he heard the boy follow.

His apprentice hesitated at the table, as if waiting for an invitation to so much as touch the chair let alone sit. After motioning for him to sit Ben moved back over into the kitchen that opened off the common to grab the last of the utensils. Taking his own seat he watched Luke out of the corner of his eye. The boy was sunk so low in his chair, he was practically blending into the woodwork, keeping as still and as unobtrusive as possible. Deciding he was going to have to take charge, Obi-Wan helped himself to the porridge and instead of setting it back down on the table he handed the pot and spoon to the boy and silently went about drowning the light brown meal in milk, sweetener, and spices.

Dumbfounded, but only for a moment (the smell of warm food obviously intoxicating) Luke quickly followed suit taking his portion carefully, checking the Knight as if any moment he expected the meal to be snatched away for taking too much. Ben avoided returning the quick peeks in his direction, digging in to his favorite meal of the day. He ignored the little pickpocket's maneuvering of the milk into the bowl, the half a dozen spoons of sweetener, and the hesitant taste of spices before they too were added.

And after all that preparation the Knight was careful to pay no notice as Luke bolted the meal down like a starving Wookiee and gulped his water in two quick swallows.

When Obi-Wan took the bowls to the kitchen Luke gathered up the spices and the sweetener and followed a few steps behind, curious. Thanking the boy for his help, Ben put away the remains of breakfast as the boy watched his movements like a Calamari seahawk. Once that was done, the child skittered back to the living space. It was, Ben noted with amusement, rather like having one of Qui-Gon's injured pets sharing his quarters once again. *_At least my Padawan doesn't shed, or shred the furniture, or savage my ankles. My Padawan . . ._* he shook his head, astonished to once again be teaching. *_Force willing I won't fail this boy_*.

He went after his learner and found him staring around the room, not

touching anything, eyes taking in everything.

Where to start? Ben wondered. He and Ani had through their grief over Qui-Gon's passing forged a tight friendship that at one time the Jedi believed was unbreakable. That and the aide of thousands of other Masters, Knights, Padawans, and Initiates through the Force was invaluable in training. Now there were only two, two embarking on the training of a third. *_Best begin at the beginning_* he reasoned firmly, pushing darker thoughts away. Taking a few items from a drawer he sat back at the table before calling out. "Come here Luke. I want to show you something."

The boy came over warily and slipped into what was now his seat. Luke watched carefully, chin rested on his folded hands on the tabletop as Obi-Wan slowly fashioned out the four letters on the paper, naming each as he went. Finished he handed the paper to the boy.

Luke sat up and traced the letters with his fingers, memorizing the shape of each. "That's you're name," the Jedi informed him.

"Luke," he whispered, unaccountably pleased.

"Beru Lars is a teacher," Obi-Wan continued sliding the pencil across the table towards him, watching to make sure he held it properly before nodding his approval. "She lives close by. I'm sure she'd be willing to further your education as it were once we have you reading and writing." *_Beru will probably adopt you the second she lays eyes on you and spoil you silly_* Ben admitted to himself privately with an inward chuckle. Still it didn't sound that bad. Luke could use a bit of spoiling; he had taken to their hermit existence with the ease of one accustomed to much less despite his youth.

"She'll teach *_me_* sir?" he asked in astonishment.

"Yes, you." the Knight assured him patiently suffusing his smile.

A grin spread across Luke's features as he torturously began to copy the letters on his own finding that having nimble fingers was of some use after all despite his Master's obvious disapproval of stealing. They were a bit wavery, not nearly as crisp as the Jedi's clean script, but they were legible and in the right order.

Things were indeed looking up.

// **Padawan! Wake UP! **//

With a jerk Luke came awake, heart trying to leap out of his chest. Before he could fully re-gather his shaken control he realized he was not alone. Yelping in terror, he threw himself off the bed, crashing to the floor in the dark, crawling backwards in an attempt to flee. The dark figure moved out of the doorway coming inexorably closer, and a cry of fear escaped his lips as he raised his arms to block the inevitable, closing his eyes, preparing futilely for the blow that never came.

"It's all right now, Luke. It was just a dream Padawan. Just a bad dream."

Obi-Wan the still rational part of his mind prompted him quietly. Lowering his arms slowly and daring to open his eyes he could make out the Jedi crouched a few feet away, brow furrowed in anxiety and . . . concern?

Pushing that odd thought away he drew in a breath to steady himself. "Sorry if I woke you s-sir," he apologized, wondering what his punishment would be.

The Knight waved a hand as if dismissing the words. "It doesn't matter Padawan. Are you all right?"

Straightening Luke nodded before belatedly realizing that it was probably too dark for Ben to see the movement. *_Then how did you know he looked concerned_?* the logical part of him nagged.

"'M okay," he mumbled hoping the Jedi wouldn't press further. It wasn't something he wanted to think about, ever. The sooner he forgot the dreams the better.

Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh as he ran a hand through his hair worriedly. The fear and terror of the dream had woke him as suddenly as a bucket of ice water would have, and just as disconcerting. Even as he had bolted for his apprentice's room he had strengthened the shields around them both. The cry had been projected, with astonishing power desperate and pleading for someone, anyone to help. Every Force sensitive within the sector would have heard it if the Emperor had left any alive and at least half the galaxy would have felt the disquiet of the Force so violently disturbed. Locking the barriers down ruthlessly and praying nothing had escaped he had used the bond to pull Luke out of the nightmare as he pushed through the door, hesitating out of habit at the threshold reluctant to frighten the already panicked child.

The images he had glimpsed at that accompanied the boy's feelings were something he was even more reluctant to face.

Fighting back a wave of nausea and fury, he wasn't sure if he was glad or frustrated that Luke wouldn't open up about the past. A week of living in close quarters on the desert planet had helped alleviate some of the uneasiness and tension that existed. Routine was definitely helpful in that area, and so was the process of teaching the child to read--he had proven to be an exceptionally quick study. But it was in communication of a more personal nature that they were seriously lacking. Luke never discussed the past, never. He never brought up Alderaan after their conversation on Dagobah. He never asked about his father or elaborated about his time under Ministry's care. Those memories it now seemed, were forced to reside in nightmare, unspoken in the light of day.

In a perverse way Obi-Wan was glad that the boy now sat quaking and huddled against the wall. If his sleep was disturbed it meant that the boy could not simply forget his past fears. They lived. The fear was there, palpable and out in the open where they could now both see it, not hidden festering to darkness within.

Getting Luke to cooperate with dealing with it was going to be the challenge.

Too soon, the Force sang, *_Too soon_.*

Acknowledging the truth of his instincts he put aside half formed plans. Obi-Wan wished that even now he could use the teaching bond, but Luke's emotions were still leaking all over the place, the very night air charged with them. He spent an inordinate amount of time shielding them as he taught Luke the rudimentary skills of grasping a feeling the Force. If they had been on Dagobah it would have been unnecessary, but Yoda had been insistent-- *_pig headed and stubborn is more like it_* he groused --that he take Luke here. Perhaps it was time to begin some lessons on mental and emotional control. Oh, he could easily hold the dreams back, but that would only deepen the connection between them and increase the risk of Luke finding out the truth about his past. It time it might reveal everything, and entirely too soon for Yoda's tastes.

"Padawan there is an exercise I want to show you," he began, deciding not to press discussions of the past just yet.

Luke untangled himself from the bedclothes around him and knelt, knowing from his Master's tone he was about to impart something about the Force.

"Close your eyes and focus on your breathing," he instructed.

Luke stood behind his Master as Obi-Wan knocked on the door. The subterranean courtyard was much cooler than the sands above. It had been a long walk and though Luke had rapidly grown accustomed to the heat the two months he'd been here, he wasn't stupid enough to ignore the shade in favor of the burning suns.

The door opened and a woman filled the doorway clad in plain functional homespun. She smiled at Kenobi, blue eyes crinkling as she did.

"Hello Beru," Obi-Wan greeted her softly.

"Ben. It's good to see you. Wasn't sure if we ever would," she said as she ushered them inside. Luke stayed at his Master's back, the brown cloak effectively shielding his existence. "Owen's in the workshop. You will stay for lunch?"

"Yes, that would be nice," the Jedi responded for both of them, knowing all too well what Luke was doing so he sat, leaving the boy to deal with people other than himself and Yoda, watching to see how he would react to someone non-Force sensitive.

"And who is this?" Beru asked kindly.

"Luke Skywalker." Obi-Wan introduced. "Luke, Beru Lars."

"Nice to meet you." The boy nodded politely, but remained watchful, eyeing the exit just in case.

After a moment of hesitation, eyes widening as she shot Obi-Wan a quick glance she responded a forced cheer present in her voice. "Well Luke, its nice to meet you too." Beru began to set the table, speaking to Kenobi now. "I take it you want me to tutor him once a

week when he's settled like I did the Darklighter's child, instead of traveling to Anchorhead?"

"If you would," Ben agreed mildly as if he hadn't considered the idea in the first place.

"Of course I will, you know that," she said, recognizing when she was being teased. "Owen on the other hand . . ."

"He prefers to have nothing to do with me." It was a statement, not a question. The estrangement between them long standing and unbreachable at this point.

Beru said nothing, but finished setting the table in silence. "Luke could you go to the workshop and tell Owen that lunch is ready?" she said suddenly.

Glancing quickly at his master and seeing no objection, the boy hurried out of the room.

"Beru-?" Obi-Wan began, standing now. Letting Luke fetch Owen was not the best way for the two to meet.

"Let Luke handle this on his own," she insisted firmly.

"Beru are you sure that's a good idea? I don't think you understand how he's been living up to now."

Beru shuddered, her mind filing in the gaps with more than one awful possibility. "I don't want to know Ben. I have enough bad dreams as it is. Besides, I hardly think your young charge scares that easily. I think you're underestimating him."

More than slightly put off Obi-Wan sat back down. "We'll see."

Luke entered the workshop silently, eyes adjusting to the dark after a moment of retina spots. Someone was cursing and banging around inside. Slowly but purposefully he advanced. The man was dressed in similar fabric as his wife (if that's who she was, Luke learned not to make assumptions in such matters long ago). He had a tired, weathered face and large callused hands and at the moment he was searching in vain for something.

"Where's that damn power wrench? I know it was here . . ."

Luke glanced around at the bins beside him and pulled out the appropriate tool. The noise of the action brought the man around and the newly made Padawan didn't hesitate in tossing him the wrench.

Owen caught it with one hand after juggling it briefly. "Thanks," he grunted. Then, quite suddenly his eyes narrowed. "You Kenobi's apprentice?"

"Yes," Luke said cautiously.

"Huh. All look alike." With that cryptic statement he turned back to the droid he was working on. After a moment he stopped and looked

back at Luke. "Well what do you want?" he demanded roughly.

"Ms. Beru said lunch is ready."

"All right, all right." Muttering, he put down the wrench and cleaned his oily hands on an equally oily rag before walking towards the door. He stopped when he reached Luke and eyed him critically. "Scrawny thing aren't you? Don't you eat enough?" Luke didn't reply, he knew it wasn't a question he could answer in any way that would please this large man. It was one of those trick questions adults seemed to love to spring on children. He'd seen enough of it at Ministry to know to keep his mouth shut.

"Well?" Owen said gruffly, voice tinged with impatience and exasperation. He glared at the boy, waiting for him to answer.

Luke stood his ground, hands clenched, chin high.

"Hmph!" Owen turned away suddenly, shaken inwardly. That cool gaze from eyes too old to be a child's was disturbing, it reminded him of a past bet left buried with his mother. "What's your name?" he asked as he walked towards the courtyard, the boy a little behind him and out of arms reach.

"Luke Skywalker." It was still so odd to say that aloud. Until recently he hadn't even thought of himself with a name.

Owen halted midstep, lips pressed tight together. "Well that explains how you look," he said at last eyeing his nephew. "Owen Lars." He made as if he was about to stick out his hand in greeting but thought better of it and held his peace as they descended the steps. "You know anything about droids?" he asked suddenly.

"Some," Luke admitted.

"Good. I could use some help, if that damn fool hasn't got your head off in the clouds."

"He is not a damned fool," Luke countered, his voice deadly cold.

Owen wheeled around, hands on his hips as he faced off with the child for the second time in as many minutes "Oh yeah?" he demanded, a hint of humor Luke couldn't detect, lacing the seemingly harsh challenge.

"Yeah."

The ice in that serious tone was enough to make Owen shiver even in the midday heat. Suddenly angry at himself, he turned away.

"Aw. . ." Stomping along he threw open the door. "Arguing with a munchkin. . . waste of time. . ." he muttered.

He entered the kitchen and saw Obi-Wan sitting at the table. The Jedi looked up and nodded in greeting. "Owen."

"Ben," he grunted, directing his frustration and nervousness about the boy into anger at Ben. It was, in retrospect, not a wise thing to do.

Luke stepped into the kitchen, eyes zeroing in on the moisture farmer who was glaring at his Master. There was something in his stare that demanded Owen's attention, reminded him of his brother. Owen looked away from the blond boy and muttering, left the room, unnerved once again. Coolly, Luke watched him go.

Did that just happen? Obi-Wan thought in astonishment. He glanced at Beru who innocently continued cooking as if nothing had occurred.

Owen reentered, cleaned up somewhat, and sat down to eat. Beru took her place and then Luke slid onto the only chair remaining next to his Master. After a few bites, the farmer looked up.

"I suppose," he said slowly "that if he helps me part of the day learning a *_real_* trade, we can call the weekly lessons covered."

"Then it's settled," Beru said with a smile. "Seconds?" she offered Luke, whose plate was already empty.

Brow scrunching in thought, Luke shook his head. "It doesn't work that way."

"Yes it does," Obi-Wan countered serenely kneeling on the floor opposite the boy who sat cross-legged, the mec-ball in front of him.

"It needs the parts to move sir." Luke picked up the simple child's toy and poked at its innards, eyeing them practically.

"You can move it without the parts," Ben explained. "Focus and calm your mind and reach for the Force, just like you did at port."

"At the same time?"

"Yes Luke."

Placing the mec-ball carefully down before him the boy squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his fists as he concentrated.

"Relax," the Jedi ordered gently. "Take a deep breath. Just like building the wall in your mind. Stretch out with your feelings." Luke swallowed audibly and let his hands go slack as he let out his breath and slowly inhaled. The mec-ball twitched and then very slowly rolled forward, stopping only when it gently nudged the Knight's knee. Cautiously, radiating disbelief Luke opened one eye and then both as he took in what had happened. "See?" Obi-Wan said knowingly. "You can do it."

Blinking in surprised Luke stared at the mec-ball and then looked at the Jedi eagerly. "Can I do it again sir? Please?"

"Yes of course." Ben smiled as Luke sat a little straighter. "Try keeping your eyes open this time Padawan," he suggested teasingly.

Solemnly the boy nodded. "Yes sir." But even the somber tone didn't cover the excitement and wonder in those eyes.

"Hey!"

The sudden exclamation didn't surprise Luke, and he hardly looked up from the droid he crouched beside. He had heard the stranger approaching for over a minute now, the noise of a kicked stone echoing loudly off the Lars' home and workshop. Even without the sound he had know, Luke thought with a growing sense of accomplishment. It was just like his Master had said, through the Force he could feel people without seeing them.

A dark-haired boy came to stand next to the droid. With self-assurance and an easy-going manner the older child introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Biggs, Biggs Darklighter. You're Luke?"

Luke nodded, slightly confused about what this person wanted with him. Ms. Beru had mentioned the Darklighters and their son to Obi-Wan the first day he had visited the Lars' farm. He wondered absently if this person was the leader of some local gang and whether he'd have to endure a pounding or something.

"Great! Finally someone near my own age who lives nearby!" The relief and happiness was apparent in Darklighter's voice.

"How old are you?" Biggs asked as he grabbed a cleaning rag and knelt down to help Luke.

Nearly dropping the thin probe he was using to scrape of carbon scoring as he watched Biggs attack the job with cheerful ferocity. What in the nine hells was the boy doing? Helping? Helping *_him_*?? Luke realized he'd been asked a question and stumbled for an answer. "I- uh . . ."

But Biggs plowed ahead regardless of the blond boy's stuttering. "You the Lars' son or nephew or something?"

This Luke could answer and did, watching the other boy out of the corner of his eye in bewilderment. "No. Ms. Beru teaches me."

"So you work for your studies?"

"I help out and Mr. Owen lets me use his tools on the skyhopper," he heard himself answering before he could think about it.

Biggs turned his brown eyes on Luke's blue one's, his voice filled with awe. "You have a skyhopper?"

Why am I telling him this Luke thought frantically. *_I don't even KNOW him!_* But a part of his brain knew what to do, even if the rest of it didn't. "I'm . . . working on one Mr. Owen has."

"Really?" Biggs sounded very impressed. "Can I see it?"

Luke shrugged. "It's right there." He jerked his head towards the tarp covered lump in the darkened part of the interior of the

workshop. "I work on it sometimes when I here."

"You live close by?"

Luke stared out at the sands. "Live out there."

Biggs followed his gaze. "You live out in the Dune sea?" At his new friend's nod Biggs decided to enlighten him. "But no one lives out there but Crazy Old Ben."

"He's not crazy," Luke said firmly as he dug the probe around the servos.

"Well . . . my mom said--"

Luke rounded his gaze on the older boy, eyes like ice, so cold they burned, his voice a menacing growl, suddenly not caring a whit how big or old the other boy was. "He's *_not_*"

Biggs swallowed, suddenly unnerved, the hairs on the back of his neck pricking. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry," he apologized, holding up his hands placatingly.

Luke blinked and forcibly relaxed. What was he doing? Defending Kenobi? Pushing the idea to be thought about later he let his gaze soften turned back to the droid and muttered "If he's crazy then I'm completely nuts."

Biggs grinned. "You're not nuts Luke. You sure don't talk much do you?"

The former thief shrugged, his mouth twisting into something that was either a lopsided smile or a grimace.

"Is it nearly finished?" Biggs asked as he scrubbed the droid's square head.

"The skyhopper?" Luke asked. Darklighter nodded "Soon I hope. I just got to get an ignition plug and I think I can rig the rest of it. It's nearly done and then maybe he'll teach me to fly." He didn't feel uncomfortable as he thought he would sharing this wish with the stranger. Darklighter didn't seem like any other kid he'd met. He wouldn't dream of telling any of them if he had access to something as valuable as a 'craft.

"Wow. My dad says I can't learn to fly for another year but he did take me to see the races at Mos Esley a couple of months ago."

Curiosity piqued Luke's hand stilled and turned his attention wholly to Darklighter. "Races? What kind of races?"

Obviously a favorite subject, Biggs dropped the rag and attempted to explain to Luke the intricacies of the pastime, hands waving wildly for effect. "Podraces. They go sooo fast, ZOOM! And they crash all the time. They use all the canyons around here as the track. There's big money for the winners, but no human could ever win it."

Putting the probe down entirely, droid now forgotten, Luke sat, ready to hear more. "Why not?"

The sand buffeted the house, howling like a wild beast fighting to get in. It was a little frightening Luke admitted to himself secretly with a tiny shiver, like it was trying to get at them, trying to eat them alive, but at the same time there was a deep sense of comfort, of rightness in the surroundings that permeated him down to his very bones.

His senses tingled slightly and he turned from his tiny window to look over his shoulder at the door. The Jedi stood within the doorway, watching him intently, waiting, hands clasped in front of him as was his custom as if not wanting to startle him by entering suddenly.

"Sir?" Luke acknowledged, wondering if there was something he wanted.

"We're safe in here Luke," Obi-Wan said softly. Luke pulled away from the window, inwardly cringing at the thought of his feelings being so evident. There seemed nowhere to hide, no place deep enough inside, no mask uncrackable; the Jedi seemed to see right through him which worried Luke to no end. If he could see his feelings, what else could he see? What other ugly things could he know? There was power in that, power in the knowledge his Master held that could so easily be used to hurt instead of teach. Paranoia whispered at the edges of his thoughts, sibilant and fleeting. Shaking the darkness from around him (for fear was something a Jedi shed from themselves he reminded himself sternly) he turned to face Obi-Wan.

The Knight entered the room. "You should finish getting ready for bed." He was no longer constrained to keep out of arms reach from Luke, but kept physical contact down to nothing. He had no desire to frighten the boy who seemed adamant in his refusal to shed any of his habits of hiding in corners (though at least he no longer hid under furniture. At least not too often anyways), wary watchful silences, and near fanatical self-reliance among other bizarre survival skills.

Quickly shucking out of his tunic, the learner pulled the nightshirt over his head, brushing the hair out of his eyes absently, baggy sleeves falling back to his elbows suddenly revealing abused flesh.

Biting down a sudden surge of a protective streak the Jedi hadn't had since Anakin was with him he controlled his voice and asked his question. "When did this happen?" Obi-Wan nodded to the jagged scar that spoke of no medical attention from the base of the boy's wrist to his elbow. He made no move to touch it, angry and red as it appeared on the now tanned skin. It screamed of suicide, of hopelessness, and the Knight's stomach twisted at the thought and mental picture of the child, his Padawan, dragging some filthy jagged piece of metal across his flesh in an obviously futile effort to escape the horrors of life.

Luke shrugged tightly looking away as he replied, a clear sign Obi-Wan noted that he was uncomfortable. "It's old, sir. Happened when I was little."

*_You *are* little_* Obi-Wan thought with a sad smile tempered by a faint exasperation that the boy continued to brush off all openings to discuss the past. *_Patience!_* he chided himself, *_give him time. You haven't even known him a year!_*

Luke dragged the overlong sleeves of his nightshirt over the scar, muttering ruefully that it was a waste to have separate clothes for sleeping in. He had resisted every effort Obi-Wan had made to buy him anything except a survival kit which he treasured with the same regard most people prized jewels. But the Knight had been insistent. Obi-Wan was insistent about a lot of things like bedtimes and regular mealtimes even when he wasn't hungry. He used to be hungry all the time until the dull ache in the pit of his stomach was something he lived with every day. Now there was more food than he could be coaxed to eat. His Master was very odd Luke concluded at long last. There was no one else quite like him anywhere. But tolerating the man as a teacher was one thing, having him take *_care_* of him was quite another.

He was quite capable of taking care of himself!

Obi-Wan listened with a wry expression to the familiar mumbled tirade as he cast his eye around curiously at the rather bare little quarter. There were the school books, paper (Luke like many Jedi before him, including himself preferred it to a light slate), some mechanical odds and ends that had magically migrated inside from the mess he'd been tinkering with at the Lars' mostiure farm, and a prized set of old republic star charts Obi-Wan had given him for study, but precious little else. It barely looked lived in.

Not for the first time, Obi-Wan wished he could fully open the Master/Padawan bond between them. It would help with many things; some levels of training were nearly impossible to complete successfully without it and it would do Luke a world of good to understand how much he was safe and cared for. But it was not possible because of the damned Secret he had to keep from his learner.

He only hoped, someday, that Luke would forgive him.

But at the moment the boy needed to trust, need to care about something again besides surviving from moment to moment. He could not fulfill his potential, his destiny as a Jedi without it.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure how far he had reached with Luke, the child had yet to reach back. His scars ran deep on more than just his skin.

"Jedi need sleep as much as anyone," he reminded his apprentice as he watched the muttering former pickpocket crawl into bed. "Rest now Luke. The storm will rage for hours."

That was the acceptable response to Luke's disgust over bedtimes, or mealtimes, or washing up. Any mention of "because I said so" or "you can make your pallet up near me if you are scared" was unacceptable, null program like a droid that was missing certain crucial pathways.

It was odd.

It was strangely sad.

It was Luke.

And Obi-Wan hoped to remedy it soon.

3. Homecoming Chapter 3

WARNING: I've made some significant changes to the first parts of this story so you may have to reread before you get to the new stuff.

"Go ahead, have one," Beru offered the plate to the boy. Luke reached out and took one and popped it into his mouth and palmed another two slipping them away for later. Fluer cakes were his favorite. "Finished for today?" she asked, taking in his oil stained clothes.

"Yes Ms. Beru." he said with a nod, swallowing hurriedly.

"Wipe your mouth," she admonished and managed not to laugh when Luke dragged his sleeve across his mouth.

"Still here?" Owen asked as he descended into the kitchen. "It's getting late. Don't want to be out after dark Luke."

Beru had wrapped several of her cakes and handed them to the boy. "Here take some in case you get hungry on the way."

"Thank you."

"Don't forget to send a message when you get there," Owen reminded him. The boy had been making the trek to their mostiure farm by himself for almost a six months now, and was according to Obi-Wan incapable of being lost, but Owen knew that nature on Tatooine gave no second chances to the unwary. When he could Owen would drive Luke home, but today . . . "I'd drive you back but--"

Luke shook his head. Traders were coming, he knew that and Mr. Owen had to be there. "I can walk. Thank you." He nodded to Ms. Beru and hurried out the door.

"Don't forget the message Luke!" Owen yelled after him.

"I won't!" he called back.

It wasn't until the first strong blast of wind caused the house to shudder that Obi-Wan broke his meditations. He reached out and realized that it was late and Luke was not yet home.

Shaking his head trying to return himself to the here and now, he rose and made his way to the comm unit. It would not be the first time Luke had stayed the night at his Aunt and Uncle's house. It looked like a storm was brewing though one this late in the season was unusual. Owen had a good sense for these things and probably kept Luke there.

He keyed in the appropriate code and barely had to wait a few seconds before Owen's voice filled the room. "Luke? Luke is that you?"

Obi-Wan felt a strange tightness grip his heart. "Owen it's Ben. Luke isn't here. I thought--"

"Luke isn't home yet?" Owen asked anxiously. "He left over two hours ago! We've been waiting; I was going to call. The wind has picked up. Storm's brewing. It came out of nowhere. Where is he?"

Obi-Wan forced himself to be calm; he had to find Luke. "Not here. I'm going to head out and look for him."

"He could have tried heading back," Owen said. "I'll take a look around. But with the wind he might wander off and not notice."

"Luke knows the way home Owen." Obi-Wan insisted. "But he may have decided to turn back. I will contact you."

"Same here. Get looking Kenobi. When this storm hits, not even you will be much good searching. Find him Ben. Or so help me--" Owen didn't finish the thought. He switched off the comm, leaving Obi-Wan's house silent and echoing with the force of the wind outside.

Pulling his cloak on quickly and grabbing what supplies he needed, Obi-Wan hurried out into the makings of the storm.

Luke yanked his hood down low across his face and raised his arm to block the wind. He couldn't see anything, eyes tightly shut against the blowing sand, but his Master's house was *_this way_* and he was too far out to turn back now.

He'd heard that the sand could strip off your very skin, and this he knew was only the beginning of the storm. He had to find shelter and quickly. Veering off his self-set path, Luke let his growing awareness of the Force guide him.

Stumbling blindly over dunes, he walked and walked until the ground became rocky. Reaching out with one hand he felt the rough cut of stone and kept moving forward until he reached an opening. Gratefully he ducked inside, rubbing as much grit as he could off his face, and taking a deep breath of semi sand free air Luke realized suddenly that he was not alone in the cave.

Coughing and sputtering Owen rushed inside, slamming the door shut behind him. Beru was suddenly there taking his coat from him, pressing a cup in one hand and wiping the sand off his face with a damp cloth.

"No luck?" she asked quietly.

Owen gulped the drink down and shook his head. "If he turned back I can't find him. I don't care what Kenobi says, he's just a little boy and fancy tricks or no, anyone could get lost in that." Owen looked

at his wife. "Any messages?"

"No," she whispered. "No news."

"What about the Darklighter boy?" Owen asked suddenly. "Maybe he went over to visit and forgot to tell anyone? Damn irresponsible--"

"Luke wouldn't do that," Beru admonished cutting him off. "He would go straight home and you know it."

Owen sighed and rubbed his forehead ruefully. "Should call 'em anyway to make sure."

"I already did," Beru told him hanging up his coat and taking the empty cup and dirty cloth back to the kitchen. "As soon as you left. They haven't seen him. It's up to Ben."

Owen punched the wall. "Damn."

A Raider. There was a Tusken Raider in the cave.

Luke backed up a step. Mr. Owen had told him about Raiders, about what they did to the farmer's mother. He'd taken Luke out to the edge of the farm and showed him the markers of the Lars family, their names obscured and nearly wiped clean by the scouring sand. He hadn't said anything to Luke, not even their names. Mr. Owen had only told him in a cold quiet voice that the Sand People had taken his mother and the only thing that had been recovered was her body.

Then he'd simply walked away and left Luke there staring at the worn headstones.

And here was one of them, a Raider hiding out in the cave he'd managed to find. He dared not take his eyes off the Tusken to look at the weather outside to see if the storm was passing, not that it was necessary with the wind howling behind him.

There was a low moaning sound that was not the wind or the Raider and Luke realized the Tusken had brought his Bantha into the shelter of the cave as well. The creature turned its great horned head towards him and snuffed once, twice in his direction and then settled down more comfortably on the floor. The Tusken was no so easily calmed. The lense eyes stared at him and slowly the Raider got to his feet.

Luke forced himself not to retreat. He had no weapons, nowhere to go, and no way to communicate. But if he remembered the horror stories Biggs had cheerfully told him the worst the Tusken would do to him would be killing him.

Well, there were worse things than death.

The Raider moved closer, silent. It peered at him and Luke wished he could see that face, see the eyes so he would know if he would be toyed with first or killed outright. A hand suddenly darted forward and latched painfully onto his hair.

Clenching his teeth in pain, Luke took a deep breath, reached for the

Force and *_pushed_* the Raider away, pulling himself free. The Tusken stared up at him from the ground silent for an instant but then swiftly up on his feet and howling something in fury and waving his arms in the air. The Raider swung at him and Luke *_felt_* it coming and managed to duck but the second attack sent Luke crashing into a wall.

Raising his arms to block further blows, Luke was surprised when none came. He opened his eyes and found his sight of the Tusken blotted out by a mountain of wooly fur. The Bantha turned its head toward him and stared at him. Scrabbling back proved futile as the animal merely followed. It . . . liked him? Luke felt its, no *_her_* curiosity and instinct fill him. The Bantha would protect her cub.

The Raider procceded to rant and rave at the animal, pacing erradically about the cave. Luke peered as best he could around the massive creature, trying to figure out what was going on. The Tusken was angry but had not shot at the Bantha in an effort to get to him. The Tusken was . . . sad? Luke licked his lips and tasted blood. Ignoring it he reached out cautiously with the Force. // **--sorrow, anger, fury, grief, hatred, vengeance-- **//

The Raider continued to scream in tandem with the storm, but made no move to get beyond his mount to reach Luke, except the occasional shaking of his fist and brandishing of his weapon as he continued to stomp around the cave.

Utterly confused Luke stayed where he was watching spellbound as the strong emotions swirled around him and nearly jumped out of his skin when something wet brushed his neck.

The Bantha had leaned over and was now nuzzling his neck.

He glanced over at the Raider and found him on his knees spitting what could only be curses at him and the animal. Luke didn't even begin to understand, but this was where the Force had led him and if he was to be a Jedi he would have to trust in the Force, that was what his Master had taught him.

The Bantha once again knelt down in between boy and Raider. Luke huddled in the shelter of the beast and despite his best efforts to stay awake and keep watch on the Tusken the white noise of the storm and the warm rumbling of the Bantha lulled him to sleep.

It was strangely the sound of silence that woke him. Luke blinked and found himself surrounded by wooly fur that rose and fell like a shifting dune. Looking around he saw the other occupant of his cave refuge lying against the other side of the massive Bantha.

Wriggling, Luke sought to extricate himself without waking either animal or Raider and slip out before--

A low distant screaming sound broke the quite and Raider surged to his feet, weapon in hand, the Bantha rising as well.

A krayat dragon! Luke thought. They were said to live beyond the Dune Sea in the Wastes. Was he that far from his Master's house?

The Raider and his mount moved towards the entrance, the animal managing to remain between the two of them until the Tusken was outside and Luke was inside, the Bantha between them.

Luke watched half wary half in amazement as the Tusken leapt up on his mount and turned those lense eyes on him, weapon at the ready for a long moment.

The scream sounded again the Bantha began its slow gait forward. Her rider nearly dropped his rifle and yelled at her, but the animal headed out of the canyon away from the threat.

Which judging from the screeching cries was getting closer.

Swallowing hard, Luke edged back father into the cave. He couldn't fight a dragon, he didn't even have a lightsaber like Obi-Wan did. But he could hide. Quickly he ran towards the blackness of the cave, taking deep measured breaths, refusing panic. Finding a nitch in between two stalagmites Luke curled up making himself as small as possible and closed his eyes. Barely moving his lips he soundlessly took up the old familiar litany, unsure if it would work on a dragon, but it couldn't hurt.

"Go away, I'm not here, I'm not here, you can't see me, go away, I'm not here . . . "

Obi-Wan scrambled across the rocky bottom of the wide canyon, noting with dismay the fading specter of Bantha and Raider leaving the area in a rush. Imitating the krayat dragon call made sue he wouldn't have to deal with them, but he wondered if it was already too late. He had tracked Luke until the storm descended in earnest forcing him back to the house and with the dawn and the stilling winds had hurried back out to find his apprentice. Following his instincts and using the Force he had made it well past the dunes into the Waste, growing more anxious by the moment fearing that all he would find would be the body of his apprentice.

Once again he wished they didn't have to spend quite so much time shielding themselves not only from the Sith but from each other.

"Luke!" Obi-Wan called out, waiting until the echo died away before moving forward towards the opening he spied amid the rock walls of the canyon. Inexplicably he halted at the entrance. He felt a faint itch at the back of his neck. Someone was in there. Someone was using the Force to keep everything out.

Unable to stop smiling in relief, the Jedi Master pushed passed the rather insistent suggestion that he go away and hurried towards its source.

Obi-Wan found Luke unerringly in the darkness and reached out to touch his Padawan's shoulder. "Luke? Are you all right?"

The boy jumped at the touch, hitting his head against rock hard

enough to jar a cry out of him. Instantly realizing his mistake, Obi-Wan knelt, drawing his lightsaber with a *_snap-hiss,_* letting the blue light of the blade illuminate his features. "It's me, Luke. Only me," he soothed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. It's all right now, you're safe."

Luke blinked owlishly at his Master, a look of recognition replacing pale desperation on his face. "Master." The word spoken with such relief was out before he could stop himself.

Now it was Obi-Wan's turn to blink. Luke never called him that.

Luke colored slight but then remembering his situation recovered quickly as he extricated himself from his hiding place, crouching now beside Obi-Wan. "There's a dragon. I heard it. It scared the Raider away. Did you fight it?" Luke asked with barely concealed excitement. He had watched his teacher practice with his saber many times but to see him in a battle, with a dragon no less . . .

"There was no dragon," Kenobi told him with a slight smile. "That was me," he said tapping his chest once.

"You?" Luke echoed in amazement as the Jedi urged him to stand and began shepharding his charge out of the cave. "But it sounded like a real dragon. How did you do that? Can you show--?"

"A lesson for another time, Luke," Obi-Wan assured him as the reached the shaded entrance. Switching off his lightsaber, Obi-Wan knelt down and examined Luke in the light. For a moment his hand raised to touch the vivid bruise on his Padawan's left cheek, wanting to brush the sand away from the bloody scrapes on his chin and hands, and bandaged the gash near his hairline but he stopped himself. Luke had flinched as soon as he caught sight of the movment towards him. He looked wound up so tight he was practically vibrating; he would crash and crash hard soon and then Obi-Wan would have all the time he needed to tend to his injuries. For now he tore off a scrap of his tunic and held it out to the boy. "You've cut your head open," he informed Luke calmly, watching as his apprentice pressed the cloth against the blooded matted hair.

Luke closed his eyes, exhaustion sweeping over him. For now he just wanted to be back at his Master's house, in his room, in his bed. There was no more perfect place in all the universe right now. His eyes opened reluctantly when he hear Obi-Wan rise to his feet.

"Let's go home, my young Padawan."

Obi-Wan had let Luke sleep until the next morning, doctoring his cuts and bruises while he slept. It was a sign of how comfortable the little thief had grown with him that he did not even stir during the whole process where in the past, just walking by Luke's room in the night had roused him.

He had breakfast waiting when Luke joined him, still stifling yawns trying to shake himself awake. It was a wonder the boy had managed to walk all the way back to the house at all. Kenobi figured it was the

sheer determination to not be carried in any way that had made it possible.

Shaking his head with amusement Obi-Wan dug into his meal.

"Master?" a tentative voice broke the silence. Obi-Wan tried hard not to choke. Conversation during a meal initiated by Luke was rare, and he'd called him *_Master_*.

Kenobi reached for his cup and taking a long swallow clear his throat before trusting himself to answer. "Yes Luke?"

"Ms. Beru made some fleur cakes." Fleur cakes were Luke's favorite; anyone with eyes knew that. The boy pulled out a napkin wrapped bundle and placed it on the table between them.

Obi-Wan reached out and unwrapped the package. They were squashed, sand invaded, and very sticky. Bits of the tissue stuck to the mass like confetti. Hardly appetizing.

But it was a gift from his Padawan, and Obi-Wan had spent months trying to break through the impenetrable wall that Luke had surrounding himself. Compassion and caring for others was an integral part of being a Jedi. He, along with Owen and Beru, had worked for a long time to reassure Luke that if he finally dared put aside a deep seated need to protect himself from the universe and reach out to others he would not be hurt. Perhaps Master Yoda was right, perhaps Luke could indeed unlearn fear and learn trust again.

"Thank you Padawan," he said solemnly.

Luke nodded once in return, before sliding out of his chair and escaping to the kitchen with his empty plate.

Obi-Wan watched his Padawan's hurried exit before turning his attention back to the fleur cakes.

He ate the lot.

The metal cylinder was heavy in his hand. He gripped it with both hands trying to grow accustomed to the unexpected weight.

"That belonged to your father. He wanted you to have it when you were old enough," Obi-Wan said softly.

Luke dragged his eyes away from the lightsaber to meet his Master's who was sitting across from him, watching intently.

"Mine?" Luke finally asked, holding on even tighter as if he expected it to be snatched away.

"Yours," Kenobi affirmed taking his own lightsaber in hand and gesturing outside. "I thought you would like to join my evening practice," he suggested lightly.

Luke was out the door before Obi-Wan had a chance to stand.

"No, Padawan."

Following his Master's lead, Luke deactivated his father's lightsaber with obvious reluctance. "But--"

"No," Obi-Wan countered firmly. "You are letting anger guide you. You cannot get angry. Perhaps this is the wrong time."

Luke's eyes widened in disbelief and he pulled the weapon close to his chest. "No, Master. Please teach me."

The Jedi eyed him carefully. "Why?"

Luke took a deep breath. His Master was giving him a chance to explain. He wouldn't take the lightsaber if Luke could convince him he was ready to learn this. "I want to know how to defend myself."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at this. "Really? From whom Padawan?"

"Just in case," Luke added hastily.

"In case of what?"

Luke shook his head, unable to answer.

"Come here," Obi-Wan motioned his apprentice forward who came to stand before him, staring up at him with blue eyes that were his father's, with Anakin's stubborn tilt to his chin, and Amidala's steel determination. "Luke if anything were to ever happen to me you would not be turned over to Ministry."

Luke scowled. "Nothing is going to *_happen_* to you. I would--"

"No Padawan," Obi-Wan cut him off sharply. "We've spoken about this. You cannot react in anger, in fear, or in hatred. Ever. Your emotions determine your path. A Jedi's path is none of these regardless of what happens. People hurt those you care about, and there is the Force. People die Luke, and there is the Force."

Luke ducked his head for a moment and stared at the sand as if it contained the answers he needed. "What about . . . punishing those who've hurt others?" he finally demanded, frustration seeping into his tone as he met the Jedi's eyes with a fierceness that was shocking. "Imperial law won't fix it. Someone has to--"

"Has to do what, Luke? Take revenge?"

"No! Justice! It's justice! They don't deserve-- someone has to-- They don't get to keep on . . ." Luke pressed the heel of his palm against his eyes taking a deep breath. Calm, Jedi were calm, he had to be calm.

Obi-Wan knelt. "Padawan if you strike in anger even if the cause is just, if retribution is due, their darkness will consume you. You will be no different from them. You will *_become_* them. There was another . . ." He stopped, unsure, unwilling to bring those memories

to the surface, but maybe this way Luke would understand. He continued on in an almost hushed whisper, as if to speak louder would make the bloody past more real. "There was another Jedi who thought to use the Force to prevent and punish what *_he_* thought was wrong. He believe it was the right path, a Jedi's duty to hold judgement and act as executioner. And that is what he did. Thousands, Luke," he breathed, as he remembered the many dead. "He killed thousands thinking that this was his right, his place, that no one but him was powerful enough to make such decisions for a galaxy full of beings." Obi-Wan closed his eyes and sighed, putting aside the heavy weight of his failure for a moment. "A Jedi acts in peace, his motives pure and free from hatred and then and *_only_* then are their actions Justice and not revenge, for the good of others and not for themselves."

"How?" Luke asked hoarsely, as if the vision that had threatened to envelop Obi-Wan had somehow grabbed hold of him. "How do I stop . . . feeling this way? I can't just *_forget--_*"

"You shouldn't forget, Luke. I'm not asking you to like them. I'm not asking you to even forgive them. Simply let go of your anger, your hate and your fear. They don't matter any longer."

Luke stared down at the lightsaber, remembering the power in the blade, in his hands, for him to wield. So easy to just let go, and so dangerous. "I- I don't know how Master. I know I'm not good enough to be a Jedi but--"

"Don't say that Padawan. Ever. It's not true. You are worth this, you are worth everything I can teach and give you. Never forget that. Never doubt it. Never," Obi-Wan said firmly reaching out and placing his hand on the boy's shoulder.

Luke didn't flinch away.

"Yes Master." Sparing one last long look at his father's lightsaber he held it out to his teacher.

Obi-Wan shook his head and pressed the weapon back to Luke. "When you are ready, you will draw it again. And you will be ready Luke, I promise you. And I will show you how. You will learn everything Jedi and someday you will be able to let go."

Luke clutched the weapon in his hand tightly, swallowing once and then nodding. *_As long as you're there_.*

"Goodness, Luke!" Beru exclaimed, nearly dropping the full glasses in her hand.

Owen looked up from his breakfast, surprised at his nephew's sudden entrance. "Luke, what is it?" The boy actually seemed out of breath, an usual occurrence since he was doing God knew what out in the Dune Sea with Kenobi. It looked as if he'd run the whole way. Owen rose, and made to get his blaster.

"No, I'm sorry," Luke said, raising a hand to forestall the action. "It's just . . ." The boy seemed to struggle for words for a moment. "It's today."

"What's today?" Owen asked voice rising with impatience.

"Today," Luke repeated urgently. "The desert is going to bloom today. Soon. Now."

Owen blinked and stared at Beru who only shrugged and smiled. She turned her attention back to their pre-dawn guest. "Luke, did you tell Obi-Wan that you were coming this early?"

Looking slightly abashed, Luke shook his head. "No, Ms. Beru."

"Well then, let me comm him, while you and Owen go on out and make sure the vaporators are directed at the right place," Beru announced taking charge of the situation, sheparding both man and boy out of the door. "And thank you for coming Luke, catching it this early will ensure the crop won't fail. We may even manage a second planting. That was very good of you to run all the way over here."

Owen realizing what his wife was saying, was suddenly energized by the possibility of being prepared for where the desert would sprout green first. He managed to snag both glasses from his wife's hand and handing one to Luke, grabbed his coat with one hand, nearly running out the door. "Let's go Luke. Lead the way."

"A busy day?"

Owen refused to react, though the Jedi's presence was a shock. He finished wiping the sweat off his forehead. "If you're looking for him, try the kitchen. Beru's made his favorite." He smiled for a moment. "He's a good boy. He'd make a good farmer."

"Luke's not a farmer, he is his father's son," Obi-Wan reminded him. "No farmer could have done what he did today."

Owen snorted derisively turning to face Kenobi. "At least he cares enough about it to let us know with that precious Force of yours."

"I have not spent the last four months digging into the earth as he has. It was important to you and Beru, it became important to him. Besides I have something of an aversion to any type of farming larger than a garden," he finished wryly.

"What you are teaching him is *_dangerous,_" Owen hissed suddenly angry.

The Jedi stared at him impassively. "You worry for his safety. You care for him."

"He is my *_nephew._" He looked away suddenly as if that admission was painful to say aloud. He let silence fill the room before breaking it, voice distant. "Beru and I . . . we can never have children." As quickly as the private truth had been shared, Owen shoved it away. "You cannot keep him hidden if you keep filling his head with these crazy dreams of yourss. Your order is dead at the hands of your own student. You are *_using_* Luke."

"The Empire cannot be allowed to continue," Obi-Wan responded emotionlessly.

"You don't deny it," Owen spat. "He's just a weapon, a tool--"

The Jedi was suddenly, swiftly only inches from the farmer, tense like a coiled spring. "Luke is **_not_** a weapon! Every future, every possibility was considered. We did all we could. But in the end it will not be enough," Obi-Wan said harshly. "Vader will know his son," he intoned with a deadly certainty that caused Owen to shudder despite himself. "I will protect him with my life, but if Luke faces him ignorant of the Force, ill-equipped, unready he will be destroyed or taken by the Dark." The fierceness seemed to vanish as quickly as it had bubbled to the surface. "He is my Padawan, I love him as I loved Anakin, as my student, like my own son. If I could take this burden from him I would."

There was no response to that, to that **_knowing_** he had seen in Kenobi's eyes of Luke's dread fate, of the Jedi's inevitable sacrifice for the boy. It frightened and awed him, though he'd be damned if he admitted it. Owen drew a deep breath and turned and began walking away. He halted at the door. "I will never agree with you Kenobi," he said quietly, knowing the man would hear "But if you take care of that boy, you've done good enough by me."

Luke lowered the microwelder and stared incredulously at Biggs. "You want to be a pilot for the **_Emperor_**?"

The dark haired boy rolled his eyes. "No, of course I don't. Don't be dense."

"Then why are you applying to the Academy?" Luke asked.

Biggs jumped off his seat on the worktable. "Because I want to fly. I thought that was what you wanted too."

"I do want to fly," Luke agreed quietly after a moment's thought remembering the stars, the vastness of space.

"Anyway I'm not going to fight **_for_** the Empire," Biggs informed him with all the condescension of someone three years older. "I figure I use this," he said gesturing at the application "to get off this dustball and then see what there is out there on my own." He balled up a cleaning rag and threw it at the tool bin, raising one arm in a silent cheer when it went in. "I don't want to spend my life working on my parent's farm trying to make things grow out of nothing. I don't want to live here forever when there is so much going on out there. You can't tell me that you of all people want to stay on Tatooine?"

Luke suppressed a wry chuckle. "Not forever."

"See? I mean how much fun is it racing Beggars Canyon when we could be flying, in SPACE!"

Luke reached over and grabbed the information booklet stamped with the Imperial Seal. "But this is like selling your soul. You don't think that the Empire will let you join up and then let you leave

when you've got what you wanted do you? It wants career pilots."

"I want to be a career pilot," Darklighter countered before dropping his voice and leaning in close to Luke. "Besides there's rumors of a Rebellion being organized against the Empire. There is no way that us out here on the Rim will ever get to be a part of it unless we go to it."

The blond teenager snorted, "You think a rebellion would recruit out of the Imperial Academy?" Luke paused and answered his own question, thinking out loud. "If they were subtle, and very, very careful they could have trained pilots who know Imperial procedure but who would fight against it."

"Exactly. I'll make the appropriate comments that will be overheard and I'll get in touch with the right people."

"*_Or,_" Luke countered "it will be a trick to flush out potential threats to the Empire and you'll be executed for treason."

"Ever the optimist," Biggs said deadpan. He stroked the beginnings of his mustache which was becoming a habit. "Oh, come on Luke. You can't tell me you aren't the least bit excited, that you don't wish you could go too?"

Luke turned back to the pieces of droid he was putting back together. "Maybe."

"Look," Biggs began "this is the early application. I could get you one--"

He shook his head. "No."

"Are you sure--"

"I'm sure." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before answering quietly. "It isn't time to leave just yet."

The taller boy shook off the shiver that seemed to run up his spine at Luke's words. "Whatever, buddy," he responded affably. Luke did things his own way. "Look, when you do get off this rock look for me. I just know that one of these days it'll be you and me out there fighting the good fight."

THE ADVENTURE~

Luke switched off the comm unit and without turning answered the unspoken question of his Master whom he knew had come in at the end of the conversation. "That was Mr. Owen. Two of his new droids ran off last night."

"Oh?"

Luke twisted around in his seat and rested his chin on his propped up arm. "I don't know. It's just sort of odd isn't it?"

Obi-Wan cocked his head to one side. "What do you feel?" he asked quietly.

Luke's eyes seemed to stare out beyond his Master, beyond the room, through even the walls. A stillness filled the air as he spoke in a hushed tone. "Darkness . . . cold . . . so cold. Death." Luke seemed to snap awake. "Will we die?"

The Jedi shrugged. "We will all die eventually," he answered pleasantly. "but there is not death, only the Force."

Luke mouth twitched up slightly. "I better get going then. No time to waste."

4. Homecoming Chapter 4

"Luke!" Beru greeted him with a smile. "You got here so fast. Are you thirsty?" she asked, already grabbing a pitcher and a glass for the boy.

Thanking her, he took a drink. "You lost your new droids? The ones you took in for the harvest? I thought the jawas always used restraining bolts."

"They do," Owen's voice cut through the bubbling noise of his wife's kitchen. The moisture farmer descended the steps, wiping his grease stained hands on a towel. "Had to take them off, damn things were short circuiting the recharge circuits. Those parasites like to sell them barely powered."

"Were they taken or did they just wander off?" Luke asked as he rinsed out his cup.

"Wandered I think. Completely scrambled those two," Owen said, shaking his head in disgust. "I need them up on the south side before noon or they'll be hell to pay. A memory wipe will have to wait till after that."

Luke nodded decisively. "I'll go find them."

There was a hint of relief in Owen's eyes and he smiled brusquely at the young man. "Take the landspeeder and try and have them back before noon," he reminded.

Saying goodbye to Mrs. Beru, Luke hurried up out of the Lars home.

He pulled Owen's landspeeder up sharply and hovered next to the two metallic figures. Hopping out, Luke moved to stand in their way. "Hey, hey now! Where do you think you're going? Don't you belong to Owen Lars?" he asked pointedly.

The squat blue and white droid beeped and squeaked in obvious disappointment of being caught. The golden humanoid droid seemed more relieved than anything else. "Yes sir, I tried to stop him but he keeps babbling on about his mission."

"What mission?"

The golden droid attempted to shrug. "He claims to be the property of an Obi-Wan Kenobi, a resident of these parts." The astrometric droid whistled in agreement. "He says he has a message for him."

Luke blinked. "Obi-Wan Kenobi," he repeated.

"I beg your pardon sir, but do you know him?" the prissy voice interrupted politely.

Luke hesitated. Mr. Owen would need his droids back quickly which was why he had lent Luke the landspeeder, but *_Obi-Wan Kenobi._* No one outside himself and Owen and Beru Lars knew that name, not on Tatooine. Was this the darkness he sensed? Two runaway droids? No, he realized with a growing apprehension, this was something larger, much larger and not entirely unexpected. "You're early," he heard himself say before he could stop the words. "I'll take you to him."

The little droid began to hop and spin in excitement.

"All right, all right. Calm down! Don't crow at me you rusty pile of scrap! I still think this mission of yours is a fried circuit in that archaic logic processor of yours," the golden one muttered.

The astrometric beeped back as Luke settled him onto the speeder.

"Well same to you, you dusty hunk of refuse," came the retort followed by what could only be an obscene whistle. "Artoo, Really! Such language!"

Kenobi was standing in the doorway when the landspeeder pulled up. He was surprised about something-- after so many years Luke could tell --but it never showed in his voice. Maybe his Master knew, felt it too. Things were happening quickly now and Luke wondered if this is what it felt like to be swimming in water, having it pull you along, along and under faster than you could catch your breath.

"You're back early," the Jedi remarked as Luke jumped out and came around to help the protocol droid down. "What have we here?" he asked.

"Owen's droids. The little one insists he belongs to you." Both Jedi set the R2 unit on the sand. "Did you own a droid, Master?" Luke asked curiously.

"I never owned one that I recall, Luke," the older man replied resting one hand on the domed head of the astrometric droid that was for the first time silent. "Come inside, we'll comm Owen after we find out what this is all about."

"Thank you sirs," the gold droid gushed as he shuffled forward. "I am C-3PO and this is my counterpart R2-D2. We are at your service."

As he commed Mrs. Beru Luke watched out of the corner of his eye as his Master fiddled with the short, squat astrometric droid. There was no answer so he left a message and turned his attention to the

droid.

Obi-Wan straightened and sat back in his seat. "Now let's see if we can't figure you out my little friend and where you came from."

With a crackle of static a flickering blue image appeared on the table of a woman dressed in white.

"General Kenobi," she began. "Years ago you fought beside my father, Bail Organa, Viceroy and First Chariman of the Alderaan system, in the Clone Wars. Now he begs you to come to his aid. My ship has been taken captive by the Empire and I will soon be captured by Imperial agents. Inside this droid are plans vital to the survival of the Rebellion. You must see these safely into my father's hands on Alderaan. On everything does this now depend. This is our most desperate hour. Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you are my only hope."

With a hiss the projection died, the figure fading from existence.

Obi-Wan looked up and met Luke's blue eyes, carefully watching his Padawan leaned against the wall, arms crossed tight.

Was there recognition? Did Luke know who she was?

"Mr. Owen is not going to get his droids back before noon, is he?" Luke asked at last.

"No, he isn't. We shall be leaving and taking these two," the Jedi gestured at the two droids "with us."

Luke grew wary. "To Alderaan?"

Obi-Wan rose slowly. "We shall be returning to Alderaan, yes. When I told Bail he was to contact me in times of trouble I naturally assumed you would join me, Padawan."

"To Alderaan," Luke muttered turning away and heading down the hall to his room. "What are we going to tell Mr. Owen and Mrs. Beru? They need those droids for harvest."

"I have some small savings. We will compensate them for the droids," Kenobi said from the doorway watching as his apprentice changed his tunic and grabbed his coat and a few other items that might be necessary on the journey.

Luke looked up sharply. "You mean to give them everything," he said. "And how will we obtain passage to get to Alderaan, Master, or do you want me to smuggle us on board?" he asked with a faint grin.

"Don't be impertinent," Obi-Wan said dryly. "I'm sure that we can arrange transport on credit and pay the pilot upon arrival."

Luke clipped his lightsaber to his belt and stared down at his bed. "You mean not to come back," he said softly. "We're leaving for good."

"The Rebellion against the Empire is growing," Obi-Wan explained softly. "We each have our roles to play in the conflict. This is the path set before us. We can only ever go forward." Though you may not

always know I'm with you. _

But now was not the time to dwell on such nebulous forebodings of the future. The Moment called, focus was needed. "Come. Mos Eisley is a long way off, and we have to stop at Owen's farm to return the landspeeder and explain all of this."

They pulled up silently beside the smoking ruins of the Sandcrawler. Even the droids seemed to have the good sense to be quiet. The two Jedi got out and began to carefully pick their way across the littered bodies of the fallen jawas.

Like picked up a gaffe stick and stared at the dusty, cracked weapon. "It looks like the Sand People did this," he said slowly, brow furrowing in concentration. "But why would they attack jawas? Skirmish yes, but they usually only go after humans like this."

"Look at the blast patterns," Obi-Wan counseled softly. "The tracks in the sand."

"This wasn't Sand People," Luke breathed.

"No," Obi-Wan said sadly. "It wasn't."

"But who would attack jawas? I mean these are the ones that sold Mr. Owen the

droids . . ."

Obi-Wan was suddenly beside him, hand resting on his shoulder. "Luke--"

"They're look for the droids! If they traced them this far that would lead them back

to . . ." He didn't hesitate, he took off for the speeder at a dead run.

"Wait Luke! It's too dangerous!"

"I have to go!" he yelled back frantically, starting the landspeeder. Maybe they were all right. Maybe Mrs. Beru had gone to help Mr. Owen on the South side and the Imperials couldn't find them. Maybe that was why the comm was silent earlier. Maybe they were fine. Maybe, maybe . . .

Smoke was rising from the homestead. Luke jumped out of the landspeeder before it had come to a complete stop and ran towards the entrance, heedless of the heat and noxious fumes. Raising his arm to cover his face he pushed past the derbies blocking the stairwell and tried in vain to descend to the house proper, calling, hoping for some response, anything.

"Mr. Owen? Mrs. Beru? Mr. Owen!?" he yelled hoarsely, using the Force to shove past. "Mrs Ber--?!"

The stench of burning flesh assault him.

"no"

The blackened bones, the gaping skulls, eye sockets hollow, dark,
dead--

"no"

The world spun and Luke collapsed into the sand beside
them.

"no"

"no"

"no"

Obi-Wan waited and watched the horizon, cloak wrapped tight around
him as the landspeeder came slowly into view.

His apprentice was covered in ash and soot, his own coat and outer
tunic missing, no doubt used as a makeshift burial shroud. He walked
head down towards the Jedi Master, looking for all the world as if
the weight of the universe had come to rest squarely on his
shoulders.

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. Platitudes? The
Jedi Code? Was there really any comfort he could give? While he and
Luke were discussing the fate of the Rebellion, the Empire had come
and butchered Owen and Beru Lars. In every future he had seen Obi-Wan
knew his death was a certainty. But he had not known that the
sacrifice of the Lars' would be required.

Catching sight of Luke's scrapped and burned hands he guided the
young man back over to the landspeeder and used some of their
precious water to clean the wounds. It was a testament to how shocked
Luke was that he didn't even shoot his master a disapproving look for
"wasting water."

The droids, finished with the funeral rites for the jawas came to
join them silently by the landspeeder. There was nothing left for
them to do now but head to Mos Eisley. With the jawas and the Lars'
farm gone there was nothing left. Their very existence seemed to have
been swallowed up by the sands of this planet, as if the two Jedi had
never been here at all.

It was time to go.

The cantina was dingy, dirty, and smelled of myriad unwashed alien
races. For Luke it was like stepping back into the past: checking out
various exits, tagging potential marks, trying to figure out who was
here on business and who was here on pleasure, who had money, who was
pretending they had money, and who was dangerous.

It was a familiar exercise. It numbed him, helped him focus, push
aside the memory of the Lars homestead.

Luke took a place at the bar, watching Obi-Wan's back as the older Jedi began to speak with a Wookiee.

"He doesn't like you!" Someone shouted in his ear above the noise of the band.

Luke glanced over at the two aliens shoving forward to the bar. He ignored them both and took a sip from the drink the bartender put in front of him.

There was a heavy tap on his shoulder. "I don't like you either. I have the death sentence in twelve systems," the alien informed him leeringly.

Luke fought back a growl. He was not in the mood for this. He set down his drink and motioned with his hand. "Perhaps you should visit one of them."

The disfigured alien pulled back. "Perhaps I should visit one of them."

Luke repeated the motion. "And go and brag at the local authorities."

The other nodded in agreement and backed up to leave. "And go and brag at the local authorities."

His tusked, grunting companion obviously didn't like this idea and letting out an enraged bellow grabbing Luke by the collar of his shirt.

"No blasters! No blasters!" yelled the bartender, throwing himself flat behind his bar to avoid the inevitable carnage.

There was a flash of blue, the _snap-hiss_ of a saber, a scream.

Luke stood watchful, lightsaber still drawn, his back to his Master who had not even turned his head to investigate.

The band tentatively started back into their song drowning out the sobs of agony.

Seeing no further threat to their business, Luke deactivated his weapon and returned to his drink at the bar.

Obi-Wan was waiting for him, implacably calm as always. "Chewbacca here," he said gesturing to the massive Wookiee beside him "is first mate on a ship that might suit us."

They followed the Wookiee to a nearby booth where a man, Corellian given the bloodstrip markings on his trousers, sat sprawled, toying with the molding on the wall behind him. At the sight of his potential clients he swung his leg down off the seat and sat up. The Jedi sat, the Wookiee shifted his bulk with unusual grace and slid down next to the Corellian.

"I'm Han Solo," he drawled "Captain of the _Millennium Falcon._ Chewie tells me you're looking for a ship."

"If it's a fast ship," Obi-Wan replied.

The man scoffed. "You've never heard of the Millennium Falcon."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Should I have?" he asked calmly.

Solo shared an incredulous glance at his partner. "She's the ship that made the Kessel Run in 12 parsecs," he informed them with no little derision at their ignorance. "She's fast enough for you, old man," he finished condescendingly.

That comment drew Luke's attention away from watching the surroundings. He glared at pilot. Solo smirked in return, not at all impressed with the kid who looked from his coloring to have spent most of his life on this dustball planet.

"What's the cargo?" Han asked, all business.

"Myself, the boy," Obi-Wan gestured to Luke "two droids, and no questions asked," he finished with quiet force.

The pilot spared another glance at the teenager. "Local trouble?" he asked with mock concern.

"Lets just say we wish to avoid any Imperial entanglements," Obi-Wan said carefully.

Han leaned back with a sigh. "Ah, well that's the thing. And it's going to cost you. Ten thousand. All up front."

Luke's eyes widened and he fought back interrupting. He was all for giving up the pretense of sullen teenager rebel and using the Force to influence the man to pay them for passage when his Master surprised him. "We'll pay you two thousand now, and another fifteen thousand when we reach Alderaan."

"Seventeen?" Han asked, impressed and failing to keep it out of his voice. "You've got yourself a ship. One hour. Docking Bay 94. You'd best leave now," he advised. "It looks as if junior's little fight drew some unwelcome attention," he said smiling at Luke.

"Good idea," Obi-Wan agreed amicably, still playing the congenial old man part to the hilt. "You'll refrain from causing any more trouble, won't you?" he asked Luke. "I'm not sure I'm up to getting you out of trouble."

Luke mulishly kicked the table leg and stood. "Wasn't my fault," he muttered.

The left the cantina by the back entrance and went to get the droids.

"If his ship is as fast as he's boasting we'll do all right," Obi-Wan said, pulling the hood of his cloak up, hiding his face. Who knew what spies the Imperials had at port? They must know that the droids would be attempted to be smuggled off world.

"Seventeen thousand!" Luke said with a disgusted shake of his head.

"Your friends on Alderaan must really have resources and he must really owe someone a lot of money if he'd take us on a promise of two thousand Mast-- Ben." he corrected quickly, casting his eyes around to see if they had an obvious tails.

"Yes," the Jedi Knight agreed thoughtfully. "He seems almost as eager to leave as we are."

"He's still scalping us though," Luke insisted.

Obi-Wan shot his young apprentice an amused glance, suppressing a smile. "Let him think that he's pulled one over on a dim old man and his teenage brat; it will make him far less of an annoyance or obstacle on this trip."

Luke scowled darkly. He knew when he was being teased. "I bet it's a Hutt." he muttered.

"Come, we haven't much time to sell the speeder."

Docking Bay 94.

The Jedi arrived just as a Hutt entourage was leaving. Obi-Wan and Luke stood aside as the massive alien slithered away, followed by thugs and syncopates. Hiding a grin, Luke followed his Master in to see the "famous" Millennium Falcon.

The ship that could make the Kessel Run in 12 parsecs turned out to be a freighter.

A freighter that they were paying seventeen thousand for passage on, Luke thought with a snort.

Luke kept watch as the droids, still bickering, trundled towards the ship. He kept his hand on his saber, noting that his Master kept his back to the ship while he made the first part of their payment to the Corellian. Obi-Wan had felt it too.

It came then as no surprise when Stormtroopers poured into the docking bay, blasters raised.

Not even waiting for their command to halt, Luke shifted so he stood blocking his Master who made his way to the gangplank. Luke drew his lightsaber even as Han opened fire.

A rising anger filled him. These Imperials were from off planet, no doubt sent here to find the droids, to kill all those who stood in their way.

People like the jawas, like Owen and Beru Lars.

Obi-Wan moved up the gangplank, hurrying the droids along. He stopped only for a moment beside his apprentice.

"Jedi do not take revenge," he said softly.

"Chewie, get us out of here!" Solo yelled as he backed his way towards the gangplank. He and Luke hurried up into the ship even as

the _Falcon _rose in the air.

With barely a conscious thought, he deactivated his saber and followed behind the Corellian towards the cock-pit, his Master's words ringing in his ears.

Jedi do not take revenge.

Clenching his hands into fists, Luke fought to release his anger.

If there was no revenge allowed by the Code, then he was no Jedi.

The deck plates lurched beneath his feet. For one instant he wondered if they had been thrown out of hypespace, but then the world seemed to tip sideways and Luke crashed heavily into the bulkhead, scrabbling at the wall, trying to breath--

"Padawan? Luke?"

Obi-Wan was calling, Obi-Wan was here, he could help, he could stop this.

"Ma-Ben what--? What is --?" Luke managed to force out.

With an inhuman effort Luke forced himself to move, to open his eyes, to stand and help his Master back to the hold to sit before his own legs gave out again beneath him. He suddenly found himself kneeling at Obi-Wan's feet, lungs burning in an effort to drag in air. Luke pressed his hand to his chest.

"A-a disturbance?" he forced out, curling in on himself, trying to stop the pain.

"Yes," came the strained reply. "It was as if a thousand voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced. I fear something dreadful has happened."

"What happened?" Luke asked desperately, looking up at his Master. "What could happen that we feel this but we didn't feel, _we didn't know _when Mr. Owen and Mrs. Beru--?"

"Shh. Clear your mind."

"But--"

Obi-Wan's face grew still and he place a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. "No. No questions. For this there is no answer, there is only the Force. You'd best get started with your exercise."

"Well, you won't have to worry about those Star Destroyers," their captain said as he came into the hold, pulling off his gloves and sprawling beside the computer. "I told you this ship was fast," he said smugly, expression fading as his audience failed to react. "Don't everyone thank me at once," he muttered.

Luke ignored the man and grabbed and activated the remote, removing

his lightsaber from his belt.

Han looked watched Luke practice idly for a few minutes, before he couldn't resist on commenting. "You know kid, you're pretty good with that laser sword."

Luke spun the blade behind his back, blocking a stun bolt before whirling around on his heel to face the remote.

"But that sort of weapon is no substitute for a blaster at your side. What are you guys anyway? Mercs? You blow off a client or something?"

"Left foot," Obi-Wan said and Luke shifted his balance accordingly, the saber twisting patterns of blue fire in the air.

"I thought we agreed no questions," Luke snapped back, carefully angling his sword to protect his torso, keeping a watchful eye for the direction of any occasional ricochets to ensure they hit only reflective surfaces and not the other occupants in the hold.

"Yeah, yeah," Solo groused, turning his attention his bellowing copilot who had just lost to the astrometric droid before focusing again on the Jedi. "But I don't think you're going to find Alderaan a good place to hide out or dig up some new business. Peace lovers on that planet. All idyllic paradise and the glory of dead dusty history. Unless you're there on a job. If so, good luck, you'll need it."

"There's no such thing as luck," Obi-Wan said with a laugh.

The timer on the remote beeped at the sphere fell silent. Luke, not even breathing heavily, put away his blade.

Han gave the older Jedi a smug grin. "Yeah, well, good against a remote is one thing. Good against a living, that's another."

With deft hands, Luke set up their bunks for the night. The droids were switched off, settled with power cords humming. He focused intently on what he was doing, focused to the distraction of anything else so he wouldn't have to think, wouldn't have to remember--

"Luke," Obi-Wan's hand barely brushed his shoulder but he jumped.

Ashamed at his inattention, Luke ducked his head. "I am sorry, Master."

Obi-Wan sat with a sigh on the bunk closest to the door of their tiny quarters. "Tell me of your thoughts," he coaxed softly. "Tell me how it feels to be back in space."

Luke fidgeted with the ragged torn edge of his tunic, his mind recalling tearing it to bind the shrouds over Owen and Beru--

"What of the stars, Luke?" Obi-Wan pressed, drawing him back to the

here and now. This was a familiar exercise, of calming, of pre-meditation release, of stilling your thoughts. Obi-Wan had taught it to him when they had first arrived on Tatooine. The stars still held their fascination for Luke and the Jedi Master used them as a focus point to teach the boy meditation.

He took a deep breath and from beneath his ever present iron control over his grasp of the Force, Luke reached out with his awareness at the hyperspace around him. "Brilliant, closer somehow. As if we race beside the light."

"And the disturbance?" The Jedi Master asked, directing his attention towards finding the cause behind the agony of earlier.

Luke furrowed his brow, closing his eyes hoping that the Force would tell him something it had not yet revealed to either him or Kenobi. "There's a-a hole, a gap. Something is missing, ripped away." He opened his eyes. "What could have done this, Master?"

"I don't know, Padawan. I fear that the Emperor has done something more horrible and unimaginable than all the darkness he has wrought before."

"Are you to stop it?" Luke asked carefully.

"Me?" Obi-Wan said in surprise. "Don't you mean we?"

He shrugged with forced nonchalance. "You're General Kenobi, hero of the Clone Wars," he offered with a wry smile. "You would have been fighting as part of the Rebellion all these years if you didn't have to take me on as your apprentice."

Obi-Wan sat back. "Didn't have to?" he echoed. "Luke, it wasn't like that."

"So you would have lived on Tatooine as a hermit if I wasn't your charge?"

"Well, no, but that's not the point. The point is my time was not wasted on you, or better spent anywhere else than with you. I trained you. I taught you. A Jedi's duty is to serve yes, but I did not teach you to use you. You are my Padawan, my learner. I only wish we had more time," he said gently.

Luke looked away. "I'm sorry."

"Strap yourselves in, we're coming up on Alderaan," Han informed his passengers over the ship's intercom. "Chewie," he said motioning to the hyperdrive controls. The co-pilot went through the last second adjustments as Kenobi came into the cockpit, the boy at his side.

The swirling of hyperspace faded, stars becoming pinpoints once again, and amid the blackness of space the blue marble that was Alderaan floated serene.

The comm beeped insistently. Han flicked the control and spoke. "Alderaan Control, this is Captain Solo of the Millennium Falcon."

Request permission to land."

"This is Alderaan Control," a tiny voice said from the speakers.
"What is your destination?"

"Tell them we are bound for the capitol," Obi-Wan commanded.

Han shot Kenobi a look over his shoulder for interrupting him, but upon seeing the impassive face of the Jedi he'd thought nothing more than an eccentric old man he bit his tongue and relayed the message.

"Permission granted. Proceed to drop into orbit over the southern hemisphere and begin descent on our mark. Control out."

"I would like to send another message if I may," Obi-Wan requested.
"To ensure your prompt payment upon landing."

Han nodded. "Sure. Knock yourself out."

The Jedi shifted to the comm and tapped in a sequence of numbers and symbols. There was a clicking sound, a hiss of static and then he closed the link.

Han who had been shamelessly watching was a bit disappointed. _That was it?_

Suddenly the comm beeped again. Surprised, and a bit wary, Han toggled the mike.

"_Millennium Falcon_ this is Alderaan Control."

"Control. Is there a problem?" he responded, shooting a glare at Kenobi wondering just what the hell he'd done.

"Captain Solo, an escort will be joining you once you hit atmosphere to see your . . . cargo to the Royal House of Organa. Welcome to Alderaan. Control out."

Blinking, Han sat back.

"We will go and strap ourselves in for landing, Captain," Obi-Wan informed him, he and the boy exiting the cock-pit.

"A royal escort. Huh." Han whistled lowly. "Just what the hell have we gotten mixed up with this time Chewie?"

The Wookiee merely rolled his eyes, nimble fingers dropping them from orbit where day met night along the planet. If Han didn't recognize honored Jedi when he saw them, Chewbacca certainly wasn't going to enlighten them. Humans had such short memories, he thought with exasperation.

Bail Organa, former senator and Viceroy of Alderaan, waited anxiously in the wings by the docking platform, pacing and watching the freighter approach. It was a foolish hope, but he wished it was bringing his daughter home to him as well as his old friend Obi-Wan Kenobi. But his daughter was as good as lost to him, lost to the

Rebellion.

The ship landed with surprising skill and Bail, entourage and trusted advisors in tow, walked quickly in the fading afternoon light to greet their arrival.

The gangplank lowered and Bail watched as a brown cloaked figure descended. The man stopped at the bottom and turned slightly to call back into the hold. Bail's breath caught in his throat as the completely unexpected figure of a boy of 18 summers descended.

Clad in dusty white with bleached blond hair, clear blue eyes, and with an aching familiar weapon clipped to his belt was the boy he'd sent away fifteen years ago.

Leia's brother.

Luke Skywalker.

The Jedi Padawan (for what else could a youth who held himself so be, even without the traditional braid?) stood slightly behind his Master's left shoulder. Obi-Wan pulled back his hood and together the last two Jedi known to exist in the Galaxy bowed in greeting to the clandestine head of the Rebel Alliance.

Bail waived the formalities aside and reached out and clasped hands with his old friend. "In such troubled times and between such friends such things are unnecessary. It is a . . . relief to see you well," he said, choking back unexpected tears. Composing himself, he turned to stare at the boy, unable to tear his eyes away from Luke.

"And this must be your apprentice," he said softly, remembering the tiny, inquisitive child all those years ago that first crawled, then walked, and finally ran wild with his twin around his home, much to his delight. Luke made as if to bow again, but Bail stopped him. "No, no. You are both most welcome, honored Jedi," Bail said stepping back and offering a bow to both of them, his own staff following suit.

Solo who was standing on the gangplank looked gobsmacked. "Jedi?" he exclaimed. He glared at his companion. Chewie tried to look as innocent as a seven foot tall massive hairy alien could.

"We have brought the droids your daughter sent to our care," Obi-Wan said, motioning to Threepio and Artoo who had joined them all on the docking platform. "The information is hidden in the memory core of the R2 unit. Thanks to our captain we made the journey safely. His payment is still lacking."

The Viceroy turned to one of his advisor. "See the droids to the techs personally and then bring them to my quarters. Arrange for Captain Solo to be paid and that he and his crew are lodged in my home for the night. Come. We have much to discuss."

"Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you are my only hope." Princess Leia Organa's holographic image pleaded before fading once again.

Ashen faced, Bail took a gulp of his drink and set the glass down on

his desk with a trembling hand. "She's captured, being tortured." He ran his hands over his face and took a deep breath. "Still alive while they tear secrets from her in bits and pieces."

"She is a strong young woman," Obi-Wan said. "She will resist them."

"Of course she will resist," Bail snapped. "But you don't know what they'll do to her, you don't have any idea . . ." He trailed off and shut his eyes. Of course the Jedi knew what the Empire was capable of, the depravities, the cruelties, the merciless destruction and infliction of pain. The Jedi knew better than anyone.

"I'm sorry," he offered. "But they've already managed to . . . She gave up the location of one of our bases, Dantooine. We were in the middle of pulling out of there for our new facility when the Empire caught up with us. She probably hoped the base would be abandoned by now." Bail laughed humorlessly. "We didn't stand a chance. They have this weapon, I don't know what or how, but the planet is gone!"

Obi-Wan's eyes widened and beside him he felt his apprentice stiffen in horror. A whole planet gone. Dantooine gone.

"There were rumors," Bail continued, pacing behind his desk. "Rumors of Senate funding for a battle station several years ago. After Leia took my seat in the Senate I was more free to watch, to follow the money, the leads. Whatever the rumors were, the reality is far worse. The Emperor has a planet killer weapon. Not even the constant bombardment of a fleet of Star Destroyers can match that firepower."

"And how much did the Rebellion loose?" Kenobi asked.

"Hundreds good people when we can't afford to loose one. Ships, supplies. One fifth of our strength gone."

"And does the Princess know the location of your other bases?" Luke asked.

Bail looked taken aback for a moment, for what reason Luke couldn't fathom. "Yes she knows. We can't evacuate the new base. We can barely make arrangements to pass on the information stored in the droid to the new loaction, it's that remote, that secret. Contact is highly limited and there is no where else we can send so many people and so much equipment in a short span of time."

"Then we must get the Princess out of Imperial hands," Luke said slowly.

"A rescue mission?" The Viceroy's astonishment was clear. "We don't even know where she's being held. She could be on Coruscant for all we know."

"No," Luke countered. "She is on the battle station. If it's actual existence up until the destruction of Dantooine was unknown to you, then it means they're maintaining comm silence. There is nowhere else she could be if they tortured the location of the old Rebel base out of her."

"We arrange a rescue mission and a diversion of sorts," Obi-Wan put in. "Ready what ships you have based on the plans. Find a weakness and destroy the battle station before it can destroy you. Such a weapon cannot be allowed to exist. The potential destruction is incalculable."

Bail sat down behind his desk. "_If_ we manage to rescue my daughter, _if_ we manage to destroy this station all eyes will point to Alderaan as the home of the Rebellion. Their retribution will be swift. The Emperor has no mercy and Alderaan has no army, no weapons, no fleet."

"You have always been under suspicion," Obi-Wan said. "With your daughter's capture it was inevitable. But there is still the Senate. Retake your old seat and denounce Leia, sever all ties with the Rebellion not just the ones that can be traced."

"Step down as leader of the Alliance?" Bail responded, incredulous. "Spend every day in ignorance, helpless, while the Rebellion works in the shadows without my knowledge? Do _nothing_?"

"There is still the Senate to work with," the Jedi assured him.

"The Senate is nothing more than Palpatine's puppet," Bail spat. "There is nothing I can do from the Senate to stop the Empire!"

"There is access to Coruscant, to the Emperor's court," Luke pointed out. "And to the Empire's funds. There are more ways than fighting to undermine the Imperial government."

"Think of your people," Obi-Wan urged.

Organa slowly nodded. "Yes, yes. It must be so. It shall be so," he said with growing confidence in the decision. "You will rescue my daughter?" he asked anxiously. "You will do this and go with her and work with the Rebellion as I cannot? You will protect her?"

"We shall," The Jedi master promised.

Bail stood, weariness in every movement, his age weighing down on him. "Then we shall make the arrangements and may the Force be with us all."

Luke found himself a bit lost in the suite that had been provided for himself and his Master. He'd explored the lavishly furnished rooms before he and his Master cleaned themselves up for the dinner tonight.

After showering, Luke found his old clothes gone. However, tunics and trousers identical to the ripped and dirt stained ones he'd worn on arrival were laid out on the bed, made of the finest cloth, bleached various shades of white. The staff had also left a heavy brown robe like Master's. And Luke realized that this was the closest approximation of a Jedi uniform they could provide for him from their stores.

A bit nervous, he put them on, clipping his lightsaber to his

belt.

"You look like a proper Jedi Padawan."

Obi-Wan's voice startled him and he turned around to face his Master. "Well," Kenobi allowed with a smile "except for the hair."

"Is it wise to go to a formal Alderaan function dressed like this?" Luke asked. "All Jedi are still under a death sentence throughout the galaxy."

"Instead of just twelve systems?" Obi-Wan teased. "Perhaps we should go and brag about it to the local authorities."

Luke blushed, taking the gentle rebuke for what it was.

"Bail's guests tonight include his household and those trustworthy. He would not broadcast our presence," the Jedi assured him. "But by being there we are a symbol in these times of our course and our common purpose. We might as well aid in a little moral boosting before we head out again."

"Yes Master," Luke said, fidgeting and fiddling with the edge of his robe sleeve.

"Luke," Obi-Wan said softly placing a hand on his apprentice's shoulder. "How much of this is strategy and planning and how much of this is simply fear at being on Alderaan again?"

Luke pulled away. "A Jedi is not afraid. I am not afraid."

"It is not fear that is bad, Padawan, but holding it, hoarding it, letting it fill you instead of the Force. Let it go," he said soothingly. "You are safe." The Jedi lead the young man to the bed and pressed him to sit. "Do you remember anything about this place, this planet? Do you remember anything concrete?"

"No, just . . ." Luke bit his lip. "I remember people, incidents, pain." He shrugged. "But there is something about this place, something that, I don't know, itches at the back of my mind. I don't know what it is but, something is missing here. Something . . ."

Something like a sister, Obi-Wan thought sadly. "We have some time before dinner. Clear your mind. Breathe and let the Force flow through you. I'm here, Luke. I'm here."

End
file.